

## Embodying of the Gitano self: *fiesta* and identity among the Gitanos flamencos

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### Abstract

Flamenco does not belong only to Gitanos (Spanish Roma or Gypsies) and has transcended culture-specific beginnings to be considered universal. Yet it is the Spanish cultural manifestation most associated with Gitanos, by themselves and by the majority society, that is an important element of their ethnic identity. Based on many years of participant observation of flamenco in the context of the “*fiesta flamenca*” (literally “flamenco party”) we explore some of the ways in which the expression of flamenco singing (*cante*), rhythm (*compás*) (and dance as an occasional reflection of this music) is not only the means of entertainment, but also the language of communication. As a significant element of their identity, it is the cement, which holds together the participants, at the same time that the subtle but significant differences in the *cante* and *compás* reflect subtle but important differences of identity among different groups of Gitanos.

**Keywords:** Flamenco, Gitano, fiesta, identity, music.

“*Flamenco es Gitano.*” Flamenco is Gypsy. This was the unanimous view of the participants, all Gitano, at a recent event organized by the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture entitled “Déjame que te cuente / Allow me to explain. Forum of debates regarding Gitanos and Flamenco. New perspectives on an old art<sup>25</sup>”.

But what does this assertion mean? And how is that meaning manifested?

In over 30 years of continuing experience in Spain as a professional flamenco dancer, a participant in private *fiestas*, and a student of anthropology, including a Fulbright Senior Research grant (2000-2001), I have explored the lives and cultural expressions of Gitanos<sup>26</sup> in Cádiz and Seville, through formal interviews, informal conversations and an intimate view of flamenco in family gatherings. Sociologist Gerhardt Steingress, says about flamenco: “The musical feast is more than a ritual in which the community reinsures its identity by celebrating shared values: it is a process narrowly related with the construction of social reality itself.” (2006) I suggest that among these Gitanos, a “*fiesta*”

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<sup>25</sup> January 24 - 25 2018, Sala Juan de Mairena, Espacio Turina, Seville.

<sup>26</sup> The term Roma (meaning “man” in Romany) was limited to certain groups in Eastern Europe until it became “politically correct” usage in the 1980’s and ‘90s. I use “Gitano” to refer to Spanish Roma because that is the term still used by the majority.

(party) is an assertion of tradition, memory and identity - not only as Gitanos, but as a specific group, local community or family. The shared values and construction of identity of the Gitanos are embodied in the shared artistic behaviour of a flamenco *fiesta*: “Direct experiences of the body, time and sociability” through which the musicologist Simon Firth says “Music constructs our sense of identity” (Hall and Gay, 1996: 108-128).

Flamenco does not belong only to Gitanos and has transcended culture-specific beginnings to be considered universal. Yet it is the Spanish cultural manifestation that is most associated with Gitanos, by themselves and by the majority society. For most Gitanos, whether practitioners of the art or not, it has become an important element of their ethnic identity. We can, and do, speak of an intangible “flamenco Gitano” - the Gitano way of performing and conceiving of, flamenco, both as the highly-evolved art form represented in public settings, and, more clearly, in its more informal and local manifestations.

Manifestations of oral culture - story-telling and/or singing - are important elements of Gitano or Roma identity in many parts of the world, always in a dialectical relationship with the local oral traditions<sup>27</sup>. Yet Gypsy, Roma or Gitano identity is difficult to define. “There are not enough necessary features to define ‘gypsy, but rather a constellation of communities and groups” (Piasere 1995) among which each group has responded creatively to their local history and circumstances. Each group has a certain “family air” (Piasere 2004) resulting from their individual experience over time and geography and reflected in their local cultural expressions.

In Spain, Gitanos speak Spanish and operate within the local social, cultural and political reality. The majority feel that “we are not in Spain, we are Spaniards,” while varying according to local culture - Andalusian, Catalanian, from Madrid, Extremadura, and so on. Yet the sense of ethnic identity - “we feel Gitano, and ... proud of being so” is also very strong. Moreover, flamenco song “supposes... the only patrimony which, although well rooted in the land where it was born, is the result of some certain families who achieved an expressive phenomenon of human and artistic dimensions founded in the Gitano ethnocentrism”<sup>28</sup> (Carmona, 2001).

For these ‘certain families’, who settled primarily in the provinces of Seville and Cádiz and call themselves flamencos, “Our music and our dances constitute our most secure bastion and refuge because in them we find our strongest and most reliable signs of identity” (Peña Fernández 2015: 16-17).

The *fiesta* in its many forms is the informal and local manifestation in which these signs of identity are most apparent. A *fiesta* can occur in rites of passage or holidays, or can erupt

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Willie Reid in Acton 1997: chapter 3, or Stewart (1997: chapter 11).

<sup>28</sup> This is perhaps not the Gitanos’ only patrimony, but certainly the most visible.

spontaneously, if someone is inspired or has money to spend. Wine, beer or whiskey lubricate singing accompanied by knuckles rapping on the bar. Someone might dance briefly, and if things really get going, call for a guitar.

But the main expression in a flamenco *fiesta* is vocal music - “*cante*” or flamenco song - and the underlying rhythms, “*compás*,” of the singing. Subtle but significant differences in *cante* and *compás* reflect subtle but important differences of identity among different groups of Gitanos.

The singing is in Spanish (with occasional words of Caló<sup>29</sup>). Many elements of poetry, melody and rhythm come from clearly Spanish sources (folk music, medieval ballads, etc.) but the ways in which these elements have been combined and transformed and, particularly, the manner in which they are performed, is distinctly Gitano. Furthermore, there are manners of expression and content, which are considered more “Gitano” and thus more valued.

In addition, different provinces, towns, neighborhoods, or Gitano families have significant, though subtle, differences of style in their singing and dancing, expressive of what they consider and value as Gitano. As the flamenco scholar Donn Pohren wrote of Gitanos flamencos in small Andalusian towns, “In the case of these unworldly artists... to be at artistic ease meant being raised together with the same flamenco forms until even the finest subtleties became second nature” (1980: 21).

The Gitanos flamencos of Andalucía are Gitanos, but their way of being, and their style of flamenco, differs from that of other groups of Gitanos. Even within this group, there are subtle differences, which distinguish, for example, Seville from Jerez from Cádiz, or even Lebrija from Jerez, though they are only 30 kilometers apart and their families are intermarried.

In a *fiesta* shared by Gitanos from different towns, neighborhoods or families, though there are elements in common and appreciation for each other’s artistry, each group tends to give approval to those who fit their own conception of what they value in flamenco expression. They gravitate to their own, to those who share their “style” or family air, based both on geographic or family connections.

The *fiestas* tend to be local, private, family events in which flamenco - music (rhythm, tonality, melody, voice quality and lyrics) and dance, as an occasional reflection of this music - is the *raison d’être* of the event. It is not only the means of entertainment, but also the language of communication, and, as a significant piece of their identity, the cement which holds together the participants, the majority of whom are Gitanos. It is a graphic illustration that “Identity is a lived experience, it is an open process in which a group

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<sup>29</sup> The Spanish dialect of Romani.

recognizes itself as an 'us'" (Carmona *ibid*).

In any family gathering, there is an assertion of identity, whether conscious or not: family reminiscences, jokes, stories or disagreements: engrained patterns of behaviour and unspoken understandings of "how we do things." When the family is of a minority subculture, nationality or ethnicity, elements of family culture are likely to have ethnic or national roots in addition to influences of the majority culture. As the polyfacetic musician Diego Carrasco from Jerez de la Frontera, says of his childhood: "Flamenco was a family thing: My grandfather sang the *Soleá* this way, the *Siguiriyá* of my uncle was like that..." (Seisdedos 2017). Outside of the professional sphere, this is still largely the case.

The artistic expression in a *fiesta* is not isolated from daily life. According to anthropologist Catarina Pasqualino, the *cante* is an extension of speech. Conversations about or fragments of flamenco forms crop up frequently in ordinary interactions. The verses of singing tell stories of lived experiences. The gestures and attitudes expressed in the song and dance are those of the cultural milieu in which they developed.

The quotes cited below show how the practitioners perceived differences in flamenco style:

It is either us or them, it can't be both. (Gitano from Lebrija speaking about "other" Gitanos)

The guitar playing of Morón (de la Frontera) is different, it sounds different, it has a different attack. (Gitano from Morón, about the guitar tradition of his family)

And especially this comment, at a family baptism:

My cousin shouldn't sing in the style of Caracol, (a famous Gitano singer from a lineage of Gitanos from Sevilla.) The Ortega's, (family of Caracol) have their *cante*, and those folks from Jerez, the Agujetas, have their *cante*, and we have ours. My cousin shouldn't sing like Caracol! (Gitano of Lebrija, about another family member who is a professional singer)

This was a clear cry in defence of distinctive family and local styles - and identity - which tend to become diluted, if not entirely lost, with professionalism in the art.

These differences are reflected in the technical aspects of how specific Gitanos express themselves in flamenco.

As mentioned, the most important element is the *cante*, a repertory of song forms which came to be called flamenco in the 1860's. The forms of dance and guitar are all based on the *cante*, whose basic elements *cante* are rhythm, melody, poetic form and meter as well as contents, i.e. the lyrics (*letras*) of the song. The most accessible and easily defined element is the *letras*. Usually an octosyllabic quartet, each verse is a discrete entity,

unrelated to the one sung before or after. Unlike songs of the Vlach Romá studied by Michael Stewart, (1997) in which the relationship between verse and musical structure - rhythm and melody - is fixed, flamenco verses can be sung pretty much interchangeably in the rhythm or melody of any *cante* form.

But both the Spanish flamencos and the Vlach Roma in Hungary say that each verse is a life experience (loc.cit.). In flamenco there are fragments of ballads, vendors' cries, or folk songs, but whether original creations or short segments of existing poetry, they encompass an experience in which the Gitanos recognize themselves. The original story may have been forgotten, and those verses, which survive most likely express life experiences, which are universal - love, loss, life and death - but the expression is created from the experience of an individual. In the context of the huge, intermarried extended families of Gitanos flamencos in Andalucía, these individuals are frequently ancestors of the artists singing their verses or style of song.

What really gives the lyrics their flavor and strength, though, more than the poetic content, is the rhythm, which is of primordial importance - "*compás*" in Spanish, meaning musical measure. In flamenco, *compás* refers to the specific musical measure of each song form, or *cante*, and is conditioned by such intangibles as "*aire*" or "*soniquete*," the feel or "swing" of each form.

Diego Carrasco says, "*compás* is...a question of biorhythm." (loc.cit.). Gitano singer/guitarist/composer Manuel Molina says "*compás* is a way of walking, a way of speaking, a way of kissing, a way of embracing..." (Facebook page flamengoflamencovideos, 2017) and as in all of these intimately personal actions, each family of Gitanos, each neighbourhood, town, or province, has subtle differences of *compás*. The "*aire*" varies from town to town or family to family, which in turn conditions the phrasing of the singing, the techniques of guitar playing and the way that *cante* might be danced.

The *cante* most heard in fiestas, which perhaps differs the most in *aire* from one group to another, is the lively and highly rhythmic *bulerías*. Though they share many elements in common, local styles vary in tempo, accentuation of *compás*, phrasing, content and sometimes poetic structure of the *letras*. For example, the *bulerías* of Jerez tend to be upbeat, using traditional three- or four-line short verses, while *bulerías* of Lebrija tend to a heavier, cyclical rhythm with more use of melisma, drawing frequently on segments of medieval ballads. In contrast, the *bulerías* of Morón de la Frontera are influenced by the distinctive attack in the guitar traditions for which the town is known<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Bulerías:

Jerez de la Frontera <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeBGJlb2vgo>;  
Lebrija [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQ2i\\_oTCZHE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQ2i_oTCZHE);

Within the *compás*, it is the melody in which a *letra* is sung that defines each of many forms of *cante*. Significant to our thesis is that different forms are named according to the geographical area where a style is commonly or originally sung, or the individual credited with creating or making it known. The *cante* of *Soleá* has the largest number of named variations: *Soleá* from the towns of Alcalá, of Triana, Jerez, Utrera, of Lebrija; or that of *la Andonda* (a singer from Triana), of *Joaquín de la Paula* (apparently the creator, with his descendants, of the *Soleá* of Alcalá,) of *Juaniquí*, (an eccentric Gitano who lived in the countryside between Lebrija and Jerez, and is claimed by both towns as “theirs”) and so on<sup>31</sup>.

Then we have further intangibles like the “eco” or timbre of voice. In a community, which has historically been endogamous, we cannot discount a genetic component: a glaring example is the Agujetas family of Jerez, with a very distinctive *eco*<sup>32</sup>.

Absorbing all these musical elements is a part of the identity of a family or local community. This includes not only knowing how to execute and appreciate the song and dance forms, but which one to perform when, who should perform what, choosing from a body of commonly known and appreciated verses, melodies and rhythms, knowing when it is appropriate to eat and drink, when to participate and when to listen, appreciating the complex and unconscious choreography of the whole event of a *fiesta*.

Furthermore, like Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, defined as “... embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history - the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (1990: 56) these “rules of the game” of flamenco form “a generative rather than a fixed system. They provide a basis from which endless improvisations can derive; a ‘practical mastery’ of skills, routines, aptitudes and assumptions which leave the individual free to make (albeit limited) choices in the encounter with new environments or fields...” (Brooker 1999). Thus the rules allow for a range of self-expression within the form, an individualism within Gitano identity. As the flamenco dancer María del Mar Moreno from Jerez says, “the experience is collective, but the expression is individual” (personal communication, Feb. 2018). Thus, when the “*fiestero*”<sup>33</sup> and guitarist Juan del Gastor says “When I sing and dance, I expose (exhibit or show) myself” (personal communication, Dec. 2017) he is speaking of a self that is steeped in the *habitus* of flamenco, specifically the flamenco of his family of guitarists from Morón de la Frontera.

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Morón de la Frontera <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Mp7hMzLzVw>.

<sup>31</sup> See <http://canteytoque.es/solearec.htm> for detailed analysis of styles of *Soleá*.

<sup>32</sup> Three generations of the Agujetas family:

Agujetas padre <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMo3FHWUhCY>;

Manuel Agujetas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odZQ1T7-7-I>;

Dolores Agujetas <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7ktF9TJmX4>.

<sup>33</sup> An individual who dances to his own singing in a *fiesta*.

With increasing professionalism, academicization, and globalization, all these elements are increasingly mixed together, and subtle differences are harder to distinguish. Yet they still form the underlying basis for the flamenco experience and identity in small towns like Lebrija, Utrera or Morón de la Frontera. Even in the compositions of singer/songwriter José Bacán who, “drawing on his flamenco roots, voyages into his own worlds” (personal communication<sup>34</sup>) or the exploration of his cousin, classically trained pianist Dorantes, who plays *bulerías* and other forms of *cante* on the piano, their music has the *aire* of their Gitano family in Lebrija<sup>35</sup>. And when they - or other Gitano artists - gather with their family in a fiesta in Lebrija - or Morón or Jerez de la Frontera - the family style and identity is still clearly present, and reinforced yet again.

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<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKKhInu0uRc>.

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbBxzD2YGqk>.

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