

# RHYTHMS OF THE AFRO LATIN DIASPORA

## Mexican Folkloric Dance

Mexico is a nation comprised of more than 30 states that can be divided up into regions based on unique folk dance styles, music and costumes. Mexican folk dances are visually dramatic and engaging, and they very often tell a story about what it was like to live in Mexico at a given time in the past. Folk dances are performed with energy and passion with costuming and steps identified by state, such as Chiapas, Jalisco, Sonora and Veracruz, to name a few. Ana Li Ramirez is our lead folkloric dancer.



## Flamenco

### Information by Hadia, a flamenco and Middle Eastern dancer from Canada

Although there are many theories promising to explain the meaning of the word flamenco, most lack enough evidence to substantiate them. One commonly accepted version translates flamenco as Spanish for the Flemish soldiers of the Spanish-Belgian Territories. These soldiers were renowned for their self-confidence, style and ostentatious pride, all qualities that reflect the gypsy character. In fact, the term "flamenco" came to be synonymous with "gitano" (gypsy) in Spanish Romany Argot.

Between 800 and 900 A.D., a large exodus of people occurred from the Punjabi region of India. These people are believed to be members of the Untouchables, a group within the Indian caste system comprised of animal traders and trainers, acrobats, dancers, musicians, palmists and metalworkers. These nomadic groups, generally referred to as Roman and/or gypsies, divided into two major migratory routes, the most traceable moving west across Asia and the European continent, including Spain. The first recorded account of Spanish Gitanos "Beticos" dates from 1447 in Barcelona.

It is also believed that a second migratory route took them down to and across North Africa (including Egypt) and up into Southern Spain "Andalusia" via the Straits of Gibraltar. This faction, known as Cale (black), has been far more difficult to verify and trace due to the great similarity of appearance and lifestyle to the indigenous peoples along the route. We should not forget that Southern Spain was part of the Islamic Empire for a period of 800 years.

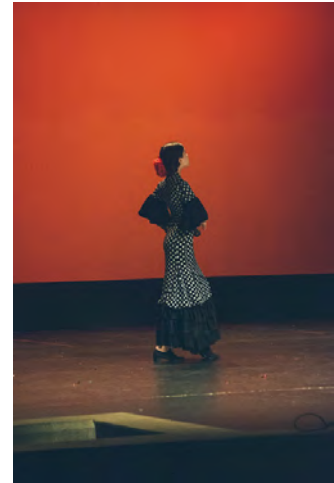
Although, the Northern Beticos immigrated to the more tolerant Islamic region of Andalusia, to this day, the gypsies themselves maintain a great distinction between the Beticos and Cales, with virtually no intermarriage between the groups.

During the Inquisition of the Reconquista, even this tolerance ended while gypsies from all over Spain were herded into "gitanerias" or ghettos. However unjust and cruel, this persecution and isolation was the very influence that safeguarded the purity of their music and dance within the family group. Finally, in 1782, the Leniency Edict of Charles III restored some measure of freedom to the Spanish gypsy and allowed this music and dance to be presented to and adopted by the general population of Spain. This resulted in a period of great exploration and evolution within the art form, which continues to this day.

## Flamenco Music

The most important element of flamenco music is undeniably the singing, "Cante". In fact, originally flamenco was comprised purely of Cante, with handclapping "Palmas" or knuckle rapping percussive accompaniment. The guitar, a variation of the Arabic Oud, was gradually incorporated in the 19th century. The strongest influences evident in the evolution of Flamenco singing and music can be traced from:

- Punjabi singing of India
- Persian Zyriab song form
- Classical Andalusian Orchestras of the Islamic Empire
- Jewish Synagogue Chants
- Mozarabic forms such as Zarchyas and Zambra
- Arabic Zayal which themselves are the foundation for Fandangos
- Andalusian regional folk forms
- Western African influences via the slaves of the New World Caribbean, Central and South American colonies. These include Rumba, Garotin, Guajiras, Colombia etc.



## Flamenco Dance

Although much less research has been undertaken in the field of flamenco dance than music, it has been documented that during the Phoenician empire, in the city of Cadiz, Hindu dancers were hired as entertainers for the festivals, aspects of which were incorporated into local processions and religious festivals.

This very strong resemblance to East Indian dance is seen in the Katak, NianiPuri, Kathakal and Bharatanatyam forms. Elements such as the deep-seated plie, outturned leg position, sharp angles of the body and arms, splayed fingers, rapid barrel turns and, most certainly, the percussive foot movements are all evident in flamenco dance.

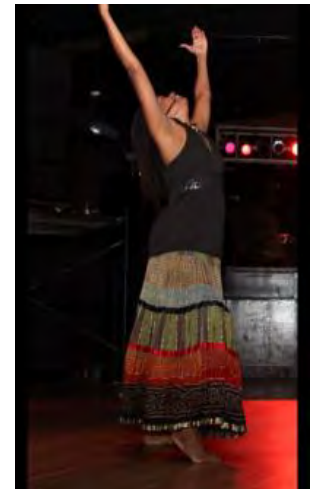
As previously mentioned, the Mozarabic "Zambra" was occasionally performed for a very brief time during the late 19th to early 20th centuries, although its role in the development of flamenco dance is minimal. This dance, in 2/4 time, combined elements of Andalusian folk dance with Arabic elements, such as finger cymbals, tambourines and atypical theatrical costuming. However, this bears no resemblance to the performances of Sevillanas, Tangos and Bulerias by the commercial, touristic band of gypsies in the caves of Granada, which Amaya identifies as Zambra in her video "Gypsy Fire". In fact, apart from some of the percussive foot movements found in the Moroccan Shikhate, there is almost no similarity between flamenco and Middle Eastern dance. Even the open-knee hip movements of flamenco are attributed to the African influence from the colonies and/or Indian dance. Absent to flamenco dance are the torso undulations, pelvic oscillations, hip shimmies and rotations, all of which are fundamental components of Oriental. Finally, the soft, fluid, feminine, sweet and joyful external nature of Middle Eastern dance is the complete antithesis of the internal, spring-loaded, strong, defiant, explosive, masculine character of Flamenco.

***Flamenco is available when one of our dancers is available, as many of them reside elsewhere.***

# Afro-Brazilian Dance

by Beatriz de Sousa Fernandes

Afro-Brazilian dance was first created by the slaves of Brazil's colonial era. The mixture of its steps, and of the rhythms brought by these slaves, with indigenous and European influences were essential to the vitality of Brazilian dance. As a result there is a huge variety of dances spread throughout the country, differing from one state to another depending on the original constitution of the local population. This explains why the samba, although known as a national dance, has such a diversity of steps varying from region to region.



## Oya

The guiding theme of Oya and many other Afro Brazilian dances focus on the dances of the Orixás - dance originating in the rituals for the Yoruba gods which has a strong presence in the North-East of Brazil, where the predominance of African slaves and their descendants was and still is greatest. The movements and gestures of this dance form come from the mythology of the Orixás. As each divinity has their own characteristics the dances vary, with strong and vibrant movements when related to warriors or thunder makers, to soft and swift movements when representing the current of a small stream, a variation which is also reflected in the rhythmic intensity. Beyond the sacred sphere, this dance is mixed with derived Afro-Bahian dances, such as *ijexá* and *afoxé*, as well with elements of popular contemporary dances, such as *samba*, *coco* and *xaxado*. In order to accommodate this rhythmical richness, Afro-Brazilian dance has as its main characteristics the rapid marking of the rhythm by the feet, and free and independent movements of arms, chest, head and hips. Whisked along by a contagious rhythm, this style of dance is a great opportunity for participants to relieve tensions through spending the necessary energy to make the movements.

**Maculelê** is a traditional Afro-Brazilian dance played with sticks and machetes. Maculelê was created by the African slaves in Brazil who worked the sugar cane plantations. It is believed that during their times of rest between working, they would practice this dance with the machetes which they used for cutting down the sugar cane. The basic movements of Maculelê imitate the movement and motion of chopping the sugar cane. Many of the Maculelê songs are song in the language of Yoruba. Yoruba was the native language of many of the African's who were enslaved in Brazil. The dance is performed in a ritual circle which is called the *roda*. Two players at a time play together in the center of circle, while the other participants keep the rhythm by hitting their sticks or machetes together, and take turns leading song. The instruments played are the *Atabaque*, a traditional Brazilian drum which plays the rhythms Congo, Afoxé, and Barra Vento. Also, the *Agogo*, a cow bell, accompanies the drum. In the past many folkloric groups in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil worked to keep this traditional dance alive. Today, there are no longer any schools of Maculelê. It has become the practice of Capoeira schools to preserve and pass the traditional Maculelê.



# Capoeira

## Performed by Grupo Balança Capoeira

Capoeira is an art form that combines fighting techniques and dance. Capoeiristas( people who practice capoeira) regard the art form as a game that is played within a circle called the *roda*. It features kicks, evasions, takedowns and acrobatics. But, this is all disguised in a dance called the *ginga*. Traditional Afro-Brazilian music accompanies the game and serves to set the pace and style of the movements of the capoeiristas.

Capoeira has a rich history that begins four centuries ago in Brazil. The trans-Atlantic slave trade brought people from West Africa to Brazil. In Brazil, West African dances, fighting styles, philosophies and musical styles combined to form capoeira. Capoeira began in the Brazilian state of Bahia, which had the largest African population. Since its beginnings in the 18th century, capoeira has undergone periods of suppression. As a result, the early history of capoeira is nebulous. In 20th century several masters or *mestres* of capoeira emerged (notably, Mestres Bimba and Pastinha) and help spread capoeira throughout Brazil and the world. Capoeira movements have appeared in mixed martial arts and dance competitions. Today, capoeira is quickly gaining popularity throughout the world.

There are two prominent styles of capoeira: Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional. The former is lower to the ground and typically engages more upper body strength than Capoeira Regional. It tends to move more slowly and emphasize strategic movements. Capoeira Angola is more traditional than Capoeira Regional. Capoeira Regional features more high kicks and acrobatics. The movements are typically faster. Grupo Balança Capoeira trains Capoeira Contemporânea which draws from elements of both Capoeira Angola and Capoeira Regional.

### Mestre Valú

Gildo Souza (Mestre Valú) teaches capoeira throughout Holland, Gambia, the United States and Brazil. Collectively, his students and schools constitute the capoeira organization, Grupo Balança Capoeira.



Mestre Valú began capoeira as a young child in Bahia. Capoeira was played in the streets and market places of Salvador Brazil. Mestre Valú played capoeira in Mercado Modelo, a market place famous for its capoeira. He learned capoeira from several mestres including Filhos de Mestre Bimba (Mestres Vermelho, Vente Sete and Coringa), Mestre Voo do Mar and Mestre Americano. However, Mestre Valú developed most of his capoeira under the guidance of Mestre Boca Rica. In 1981 Mestre Valú began teaching capoeira in Brazil. He established a capoeira school in Holland in 1986 and soon thereafter in Gambia and the United States. His student Michael Eme Eme Irvin heads the school in residence at the Global Education Center in Nashville.



## Afro Colombian Dance

As with many dances throughout The Americas, Colombia's traditional dance is steeped in the country's African roots. **Cumbia** is one of the most popular dances in Colombia. A folkloric style dating back to the colonial period on the Caribbean coast, Cumbia is played on drums, flutes, percussion instruments with African and indigenous roots. Another popular dance steeped in African traditions is **Mapalé**, brought to Colombia by Africans who were kidnapped during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The dance moves represent the strength and agility of fishermen after a long day of work. Mapalé gets its name from a fish and the movements of this wildly energetic dance are described as mimicking a fish out of water.



## Afro Peruvian and Peruvian Folk Dance

As part of Rhythms of Life, members of NYAMA will perform rhythms and dance from both the Afro Peruvian traditions as well as folkloric dance of the Andes. Many Peruvian dances have elements of their African roots, from when enslaved African populations were brought to work in coastal agricultural areas of Peru during colonial times. Africans brought their music traditions with them which mixed with Spanish traditions, evolving into Afro Peruvian dance and music. Some of the more widely known dances, which will be performed by members of NYAMA, include the Marinera, festejo, and landó.

## Latin Dance

Salsa, Bachata, Marengue, Cha Cha - all popular social dances today that had their beginnings in the islands thanks to the African base of the three roots that run through the Caribbean Islands - African, Indigenous, Spanish. Movement styles and the musical rhythms of Africa left a lasting mark on dances of Latin America. With the European settlers came African slaves, whose dances and music blended with the dances of Indigenous people throughout the Afro Latin Diaspora and with European musical influence to create the dances that are so popular today. Helios World Dance Ensemble perform Latin Dance, often with drum accompaniment by NYAMA.

