

2012

Contemporary Flamenco between Heritage Tourism and Cultural Identity

Seung ho Chung

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/chess_student_research



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Chung, Seung ho, "Contemporary Flamenco between Heritage Tourism and Cultural Identity" (2012). *CHES Student Research Reports*. 2.

Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/chess_student_research/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Cultural Heritage in European Societies and Spaces (CHES) at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in CHES Student Research Reports by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Contemporary Flamenco between Heritage Tourism and Cultural Identity

Seung ho Chung

Please do not cite without permission of the author

In 2010, UNESCO declared flamenco one of the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” According to the criteria for inscription into UNESCO, “Flamenco is strongly rooted in its community, strengthening its cultural identity and continuing to be passed down from one generation to the next.” What does it mean that flamenco is strengthening its cultural identity? When we say this, we already use the concept of culture for flamenco as a cultural agent. But, there are people who are really involved in this phenomenon. In considering that it is people who are strengthening the cultural identity of flamenco, I’d like to see how people around flamenco are living in their lives with flamenco.

This research is partially animated by a curiosity about what Andalusian people’s cultural identity is, how flamenco is being performed to strengthen it and how flamenco as one of the “emblems of cultural identity” (Bayart 2005: 68) in Spain serves as a tourism product.

This paper draws on my qualitative field research in Sevilla, Andalusia, southern Spain. In order to experience flamenco “culture,” I attended flamenco school, watched various types of flamenco performances, observed how flamenco artists live, and interviewed flamenco artists, professors, students, local aficionados, and tourists. As a

flamenco aficionado, tourist, observer, and friend, I lived with them. Consciously and unconsciously comparing flamenco with my own idea of art and heritage, I tried to understand how they live with flamenco and what it means for them to live with flamenco.

As a result of my fieldwork, I was able to confirm that the assumption and hypothesis I made in my research proposal were completely wrong. I thought that each type of flamenco would be located in each different area. In Sevilla, however, I could see that they coexisted even in the same place. That is, flamenco for local cultural expression and flamenco for tourism industry were not distinguished definitely. As Roldan (2003) said, both the use value and exchange value are embedded in flamenco simultaneously. I seemed to make a low estimate of flamenco while writing the proposal. I simply thought that flamenco in a city like Sevilla would be commercialized and flamenco in the countryside would be more traditional and authentic. My first ethnographic research was a work of breaking my misconceptions.

Timothy Dewaal Malefyt wrote one ethnographic article about flamenco at 1998. Actually, it was the first research article about flamenco I read. Malefyt (1998) illustrated well how the meaning of flamenco performance is changed depending on the context of the performance. During my research, however, I realized that Malefyt's assumption that there is a huge split between "traditional" flamenco performed intimately and privately in the *peña*, which is a kind of membership club, and "commercial" flamenco performed publicly in the *tablao*, which is a flamenco bar or restaurant, resulted from his overlooking how flamenco artists and aficionados in Andalusia negotiate the tensions of their identity between flamenco as a form of local cultural expression and flamenco as a form of

commercialized tourism product. Malefyt's emphasis on typologies also obscured how perceptions of flamenco as an art form shape the overall context of flamenco performance.

In Feria de Abril in Sevilla, there were lots of people who wear flamenco dress. I was in the "Spanish colors" that could be either inherited from old tradition or exaggerated and recently invented for the commercial Feria. One French friend muttered that they looked like prostitutes because of garish colors of their dress. But those colors were projecting the very image of Spain, which is typified by flamenco. Some women held fans. All of the people were dancing in a big tent, which is called '*casetas*'. That is the exact image of flamenco that I saw via the Internet before I arrived in Spain. But actually it was *Sevillanas* that they were dancing. The music they were playing was *Sevillanas*. *Sevillanas* is a traditional folk music and dance in Sevilla.

Whenever I asked people "Sevillanas is flamenco?" in Sevilla, people hesitated to answer it, and after thinking for a few seconds, they would answer "ye..s" or "No..but.." In that hesitation, there can be found a blurred definition of flamenco.

There was one flamenco singer, Jose, who said that obviously *Sevillanas* is not flamenco. Jose argued that *Sevillanas* is not flamenco because:

"I do not understand that (*Sevillanas*) as flamenco. I, personally, right? My humble opinion of ignorance, I do not know if *Sevillanas* is flamenco or folklore. For me *Sevillanas*, which people dance in the feria, is not flamenco. It's very nice, too, but for me it has nothing to do with a song by *solea* or a song by *malagueña*."

I realized that from people's ambiguous attitude toward the relation between Sevillanas and flamenco, flamenco is being recognized as an art form, and it has certain aesthetic criteria, which Sevillanas doesn't satisfy.

Sevillanas is a traditional folk music in Spain. I want to delve into the categorical problem of flamenco here. Flamenco is usually introduced as folk music in Spain, especially in the tourism industry. In UNESCO site, they used the term "artistic expression" rather than folk music or traditional music. Flamenco as an intangible heritage in Spain is music or dance as collective expression of the Spanish people. According to UNESCO, heritage refers to something "inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendents." But art refers to something created and performed by artists.

Gelbart (2007) showed well how the idea of "folk music" as collective creation emerged and has been synthesized with the idea of "cultivated music" as an individual craft producing new "art" music which is "individual, but imbued organically with collective" "through individual genius" along with increase of esteem. He argued that "folk music could now be aestheticized, thorough great art; and, as a result, that art could now claim to be both individual and national in its original genius, both present and past, both local and general – in short, timeless and universal" (203-204).

I could postulate that flamenco is evolving toward 'art music,' which includes both collective expression and individual creativity. Flamenco could be called 'folk music' in that it is a kind of collective expression being performed by local people as their shared musical language. However, as I observed the contemporary 'culture' of flamenco, what is shared now is not so much anonymous inherited music as an individual figure's unique musical

style. Flamenco maestros who played an active part in history of flamenco since the end of 19th century are being commemorated and shared by local Andalusian people as their collective memory. This is the one of main difference between flamenco and Sevillanas. Sevillanas could be called ‘a folk music’ in the pure sense in that it doesn’t follow any particular figure’s style; it holds its traditional pattern as a collective creation.

In the history of flamenco, those great figures are being remembered as creative and gifted artists, not mere performers who represent intangible heritage. UNESCO created guidelines for the establishment of national “Living Human Treasures” systems in order to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. In that document, they listed the selection criteria as follows:

- its value as a testimony of human creative genius
- its roots in cultural and social traditions
- its representative character for a given community or group
- the risk of its disappearing

How can we distinguish between creative artists and “living human treasures” around flamenco? This question should be in the dual character of flamenco as an art form and as an intangible cultural heritage.

Local Andalusian people probably perceive flamenco as something beyond folk music either consciously or unconsciously. When they make a distinction between flamenco and Sevillanas, they are already taking part in the conversation about the ambiguous position of flamenco between art music and folk music or between the product of creative industry and the intangible cultural heritage.

According to UNESCO, “intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage.”

However, I want to ask how they recognize flamenco. We need to clarify their recognition, paying attention to how they perceive contemporary flamenco in 21st century and where they situate and categorize flamenco in this continuum between heritage tourism and cultural identity.

In one *juerga*, which is a kind of flamenco jam session, in the *peña*, there was a small debate between flamenco aficionados about what is the real El Chocolate’s style. Chocolate is the moniker of flamenco singer Antonio Núñez Montoya who was born in 1940 and known as the heir of the most classical flamenco schools. One old singer was pointing out other old singer’s wrong singing. He cut off the other singer’s singing repeatedly and argued that he should have sung in higher note in certain moment to follow Chocolate’s *fandango* style. The old man who was cut off repeatedly looked discouraged. At the moment, one woman asked him “why do you have to sing like Chocolate?” with a dissatisfied look. The man answered, “the tones that you must give the *fandango*, are the tones that you must give the *fandango*... It's a shame because he sings very well, has a beautiful voice, his *fandango* is very good, he did very beautifully last few outputs, and it's a shame to kill the *fandango*.”

In this case, I could recall Gelbart’s saying “art could now claim to be both individual

and national in its original genius.” While they were trying to follow the great figure of flamenco singer “El Chocolate,” they were still keeping the style of *fandango* in their mind.

If we consider how flamenco has been professionalized, it could be clearer to distinguish between flamenco artists and living national treasures proposed by UNESCO. The professionalization of flamenco is directly connected with its commercialization, along with transforming flamenco performance into art labor. This issue should be considered in relation to the transitional status of flamenco between different musical categories and between different values.

Jose talked about how much pride he feels about the fact that he will be the first official professor of flamenco, with a degree. He said,

“The Conservatory of Seville is the first in the world to put people to study flamenco there for what, to come out professors with an official certificate of flamenco professor. I am of the first of the world, I am the first singer in the world with four friends of mine who can teach flamenco with a bachelor's degree of flamenco as a official flamenco professor.”

Jose is a kind of traditionalist who favors more traditional forms of flamenco without any modification or fusion. But even a traditionalist like Jose desired that flamenco should be recognized as a higher art that can be taught in university or performed in a grand theater. The categorical ambiguity of flamenco is also reflected by its professionalization and commercialization and how local artists negotiate the tension of their identity.

This categorical issue of flamenco can be found in many places. Below is one of the Decalogue(s) for flamenco singing aficionados. This was hung on the wall in the *peña* Macarena.

Respect and love for flamenco singing. For being spiritual expression of Pueblo Andaluz, for its depth and richness, it became an art, as sublime as solemn and as unique as beautiful. Do not forget that it is a wonderful treasure you inherited from your elders, so you're forced to care for with immense love and, as a patrimony entrusted temporarily, you also have the duty to preserve rigorously, to give to future generations, at least, under the same conditions as inherited.

Flamenco became an art. According to Roldan (2003), flamenco was set as a genre of art in the mid of 19th century. Since then, the professionalization of flamenco artists began and the labor market of flamenco emerged. In the beginning, flamenco was performed in *cafes cantantes*. In that period, sometimes prostitution was associated with that. After that, the *tablaos* emerged as a new place of flamenco performance.

Bar-style *tablaos* is the first place where tourists can easily access flamenco because there is no entrance fee. One night, I arrived in the *tablaos* early, at 8 pm. Most of audience members were tourists. Performances were held three times by same artists at 9pm, 11pm and 12:30am. Their performances were disappointing for me. The dancers' faces showed no animation. They looked tired and bored. It could be read that they have no passion for their work. Facial expression is an important part of flamenco. Flamenco artists express their emotion and feeling through not only musical language but also their physical expression. According to the guide leaflet of the flamenco dance museum, "each one of the

dances has its own personality, colour and evocations: each movement suggesting different emotions:

- Alegria: Happiness
- Seguirilla: Hurt, death
- Solea: Loneliness
- Tango: Passion
- Guajira: Sensuality
- Farruca: Elegance
- Buleria: Seduction

Expressing emotion is a central part of flamenco performance. Flamenco is not to convey a message or knowledge. It is to express strong human emotions. Thus, when the dancer showed no animation, she not only failed to have passion for her labor but also failed to accomplish the aesthetic criteria of flamenco.

But tourists who saw the flamenco show for the first time clapped and shouted. And because of the clapping and shouting with alcohol, the artists would perform the same show repeatedly. Because there was no entrance fee, the payment for artists was low. But even in a *tablaó* with an entrance fee, the payment for artists is low in comparison with other places, such as theaters or festivals.

Jose was my singing teacher. He is a young and ambitious flamenco singer. Even though he had pride in his work on “pure” flamenco, he used to complain about his tight pocketbook. “Flamenco in *tablao* is not real?” I asked Jose. Jose answered.

“It is to put the tag ‘real’ also depends on many conditions, [...] I mean about the feeling, right? Because it is a job for them, every day sitting always in the same and it can surely be many days in which they flourish feelings, right? And it may be that even when you are working, one day conditions such as the artist is, can be very good, very good and he knows that it is still real. Nothing more than to become like a job and, in a monotonous, everyday go to work, dance all night, every day the same, it's like, it loses some essence...”

There have been many debates about the commodification of heritage. Commaroff and Commaroff (2009) illustrate well how ethnicity, which used to be equated with cultural identity, is used in the tourism industry with incorporated identity and a commodified concept of “culture.” In the process of applying this frame to my project, I realized that people around flamenco have different perspectives on commodification and different ways to negotiate it with their identity.

When intangible heritage is treated as an art form as well as a tourism product, one might expect a tension between its commercial consumption and its artistic production. And in the process, the meaning of heritage tends to change, and change the culture of its community in either a positive or negative sense. As Krause (1992) points out, it should be noted that even an anti-modernization or anti-commercialization movement can transform into consumer culture. She shows how ‘historic preservation’ could be ruined in the

capitalist economy, changing the value of cultural heritage. Because flamenco is now the intangible cultural heritage inscribed by UNESCO, people will think about how to safeguard and preserve flamenco. In that process, as Krause said, “their establishment and protection must be coordinated with the people who occupy the surrounding lands” (ibid: 201), considering how the cultural relationship between community and flamenco can be preserved.

The new cultural or aesthetic value of ritual performance can help to construct a new identity of community. For instance, even though the Mbende dance in Zimbabwe is criticized that it is distorted and misrepresented for commercial purposes in the tourism industry, it still has a different function, which is political as well as cultural at the national level. And even though the performance loses its original purpose as ritual dance, it still “continues have a special role in the present community” (Mataga 2008: 99). Through its popularity gained from commercialization, intangible heritage can be preserved and serve as cultural expression as well as an economic resource for a given local community. Or like the case of the Girinya dance in Nigeria, the performance could gain new aesthetic evaluation (Agaku 2008, Mataga 2008).

My focus is on how flamenco artists and aficionados negotiate the tension that emerges when commercial flamenco is criticized as distorted. Flamenco artists and aficionados I met didn’t see the commercial flamenco as exaggerated and distorted. Rather, they are only concerned with the problem of low payment or negotiating with owners who exploit artists.

“Flamenco is the problem of people who sell it,” said Serjio, a flamenco dancer. “The artist works equally as hard, feels equal and equally suffers. The problem is people who negotiate, because he poorly negotiates and enslaves it. Art is always enslaved by money.”

Flamenco artists and aficionados in Sevilla attributed the commercialization of flamenco to poor surroundings and businessmen’s exploitation, not to the distortion of flamenco as an art form. What I saw in Sevilla was “*las culturas de trabajo*” (Roldan 2003, Palenzuela 1995)—the work cultures.

When flamenco becomes popular music or art music beyond mere folk music, the cultural identity around flamenco is not derived from its ethnic identity. Professional flamenco artists’ identity should be based on their specified “work culture” (Palenzuela 1995). Palenzuela argued that we can’t explain each individual’s worldview only with common class-consciousness, and we need to see the unique “work cultures”.

I will not deal with the class identity of flamenco artists deeply here. They could be viewed as a working class who are being engaged in the tourism industry, or as a creative class who are to “create meaningful new forms” in the new class structure of the creative economy (Florida 2002). Setting aside the question of how their class is classified, I’d like to focus on how flamenco artists’ identity comes from their work or labor and how they view their flamenco world. Maccannell (1976) said “modernized peoples, released from primary family and ethnic group responsibilities, organize themselves in groups around world views provided by cultural productions. The group does not produce the worldview, the worldview produces the group.”

Thus, to understand contemporary flamenco 'culture', we need to understand how people live and work with flamenco rather than examining the ethnic identity which has been attached to flamenco.

Maccannell said, "in the place of exploited labor, we find exploited leisure" (ibid: 28). When flamenco is performed on stage at a flamenco dance museum, their work is really being museumized. Their labor is being exploited by the owner of the means of cultural production.

But Maccannell also said, "The modern individual, if he is to appear to be human, is forced to forge his own synthesis between his work and his culture." That is, the labor is also their culture: the culture of labor or the work culture. Can we criticize the labor as distorted? It is their life and reality.

Totton (2003) argued "the tourist venues, known as *tablaos*, give the artist a living, which is good, but they trivialize the art" (13). This is an understandable critique. However, *tablaos* is not just trivializing the flamenco art. It has an important role as a platform for flamenco artists. They need a commercial place to perform and earn a living from flamenco before performing well enough that they can perform in *teatro* or at large famous festivals.

Flamenco artists use the commercial *tablaos* as a place they can debut and practice. Once their level is considered high, they seldom perform in *tablaos*. Manolo, who is a flamenco guitarist, said "Yo nunca toco en *tablaos*. Mucho trabajo, poco dinero. Toco solo en teatro." – "I never play in *tablaos*. Much work, little money. I only play in theater."

In fact, the performance Manolo plays in theater is called “flamenco opera,” which is “so called by an employer because of the tax benefits obtained with this name” (Roldan 2003: 251). As a professional flamenco artist, it is impossible to avoid ‘commercial’ place.

“All the great singers, dancers and guitarists have passed through the *tablaos*,” the director of one *peña* said. Since flamenco became a genre of art, all artists who are trying to become professional cannot but enter into the labor market of flamenco culture. And along with the character of flamenco as art form they could define their cultural labor in the flamenco industry not as a commercial activity but as an artistic expression.

Flamenco performers commonly expressed that the problem was in the commercial management and commercial consumption, not in commercial production. That is the way that they negotiate the tension of identity between commercial consumption and artistic production. On every stage, in every context, they think that they are doing art. In their view, the distinction between the use value and exchange value of flamenco is not caused by artists, but by businessmen. For the businessmen, artists are just art laborers who serve the labor market of flamenco.

For flamenco artists, there seems to be no clear line of division between doing art and doing work. Thus, while their perception of flamenco as an art form could be used to negotiate the tension of identity, their identity as an art laborer could discourage them. They are selling their exploited labor to the leisure class who are away of their work for a while.

In their “work cultures’, only a few outstanding artists can reach a high level of performance and attain fame from the public. But, it could be the only way to escape from

the art labor for them. All the great figures in the history of flamenco are their role models. In that sense, the hidden desire of flamenco to be art music could be derived from flamenco artists' work culture, in that only a few selected artists can get out of the tourism industry and enter into the art industry. In that process, their class could be changed from the working class of the tourism industry into the creative class of the art industry.

The labor market of flamenco should be examined in relation to its social structure in the overall context of the flamenco industry, including flamenco school, flamenco festival, flamenco museum, flamenco tourism, flamenco records, etc.

I watched a flamenco dancer, Lucia, dance two times, each in different places. The first time was when I was invited to Luica's family party, which was held to see the procession of Semana Santa on the balcony of Lucia's house together. I saw her family members from Morón, a small town located 60km to the southeast from Sevilla. All of her family members were flamenco aficionados. One old man played flamenco guitar. Women sang together sitting down on the chairs behind the man. Each person in the party sang one after another, taking turns. I also sang one flamenco song I learned in the school. They praised my courage. When the festive mood of the party was heightening, people encouraged Lucia to dance. She began to dance barefoot and joyfully. Everyone shouted '*jaleo*,' which means to yell out (words such as "Ole! Guapa!") to encourage Lucia. It was a pure and spontaneous moment of flamenco spirit. I was really watching the moment that flamenco is strongly rooted in its community, strengthening its cultural identity.

The second time was when she danced on the flamenco museum stage. I waited for the show with her in the basement. She carried her suitcase in which her flamenco dress

was folded. After changing in a dressing room, she kept practicing her steps. When the lighting was dim and the show began, she glided on to the stage and began to dance with her eyes shut tight. I could feel her passion. It was the same moment of flamenco spirit I saw in her family party.

Frequently, Lucia went to Russia for a flamenco show. She had to go to Russia for one month during March and April. In Russia, the flamenco team she belonged to had a show on tour. She cried the day before her departure to Russia. She told me that she didn't want to leave Spain and Russia is too cold. She has a passion for flamenco and a dream to be a famous flamenco dancer someday. But she is still a laborer in the labor market of flamenco. Her artistic production could be converted into exchange value for foreign money. But it is the way in which she is living with flamenco. In Sevilla I could see not only the culture of flamenco but also the culture of labor, realizing that art itself is already the culture of labor—not just the romantic cultural expression or great mastery of geniuses.

References cited

Agaku, Jacob Manase. 2008. The Girinya Dance Theatre of the Tiv People of Nigeria: an Aesthetic Evaluation. *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 3: 29-41.

Bayart, Jean-François. 2005. *The illusion of cultural identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, John L., and Jean Comaroff. 2009. *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cruces Roldán, Cristina. 2003. *Antropología y flamenco: Más allá de la Música. II, Identidad, género y trabajo.* Sevilla: Signatura Ediciones de Andalucía.

Florida, Richard L. 2002. *The rise of the creative class: and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Gelbart, Matthew. 2007. *The invention of "folk music" and "art music": emerging categories from Ossian to Wagner.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Krause, Elizabeth L. 1992. The looking glass of historic preservation in Micronesia: a reflection of modernization and changing values. *Human Organization*. 51 (2): 197-201.

MacCannell, Dean. 1999. *The tourist: a new theory of the leisure class.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Malefyt, Timothy Dewaal. 1998. "Inside" and "Outside" Spanish Flamenco: Gender Constructions in Andalusian Concepts of Flamenco Tradition. *Anthropological Quarterly* 71 (2): 63-73.

Mataga, Jesmael. 2008. *Beyond the Dance: a Look at Mbende (Jerusarema) Traditoinal Dance in Zimbabwe.* *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 3: 95-102.

Totton, Robin. 2003. *Song of the Outcasts: an Introduction to Flamenco.* Portland, Or: Amadeus Press.

UNESCO. 2010. Flamenco. Inscribed in 2010 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00363>.

UNESCO. 2002. Guidelines for the Establishment of National “Living Human Treasures” Systems. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf>.