

The musical legacy of black Africans in Spain: A review of our sources

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ABSTRACT

Did the sub-Saharanans who arrived in Spain from the Renaissance to the 19th century suffer the destruction of their original cultures and adopt that of their captors? In this paper, we shall throw some light on their memory by studying their participation in public celebrations, civil and religious. People of black African descent, freed or slave, men or women, born in Spain or brought from Guinea, were thoroughly represented in historical, literary and artistic sources from the Renaissance until 1886, when the abolition of slavery was finally approved by Parliament. Despite being christened and having adopted Spanish traditions and costumes, they held a particular celebratory role in civil and religious ceremonies and developed a number of popular songs and dances of African origin, like the *guineo* or the *zarambeque*, dances that became particularly popular and may have left traces in Andalusian folklore and music, including the flamenco. This is because they were not perceived as a threat, and could therefore be allowed to hold private meetings and celebrations, with dancing and singing, and also participate in public holidays and religious feasts such as *Corpus Christi*.

KEYWORDS: slavery, black diaspora, Renaissance Spain, historical anthropology, migration, music

Introduction

Black Africans who were brought to Spain as slaves tried to maintain and defend their identity by joining together and preserving their musical heritage, as most immigrant populations do. Moreover, in spite of being baptised and having assumed broadly Spanish uses and customs, they took part in civil and religious ceremonies in which they introduced songs and dances rooted in sub-Saharan musical traditions. This was due to the fact that they were officially permitted to celebrate their own culture, mainly on public holidays, during the so-called *fiestas de negros* (black parties), but also with the compli-

ance of Spanish society, which enjoyed and appreciated the vivacity and sensual character of their artistic expressive forms.

From the beginning of the 16th century, cultural and religious repression was centred on the Moorish community, whose dances and musical forms, such as *leilas* and *zambras* were strongly prohibited. In contrast, the sub-Saharan population settled in Early Modern Spain had a certain degree of freedom to express itself symbolically. In fact, Nuñez Muley, defender of the Moorish community in front of the Spanish Crown, in his memorial of 1566 complained that blacks and slaves from Guinea were allowed to sing and dance and play music with their own instruments and also to use their own languages, while the Moorish community was increasingly culturally repressed (Martín-Casares 2000: 423). However, repression of this kind of cultural activity among blacks was stronger in the Hispanic colonies, because the black population was larger and therefore seen as dangerous. Their meetings were perceived as potentially subversive, so there existed a large number of regulations, with specific rules about meeting points and times fixed by town councils. We know that in Seville, at the end of the 16th century, the black African community used to meet in the square of Santa María la Blanca (Méndez Rodríguez 2007).

The frequency of black African characters playing songs and dancing who appear in Golden Age Spanish comedies and short plays, as well as their mention in socio-historical sources, is astonishing. In the light of this, the lack of awareness of present-day Spaniards about the presence of Africans in Spanish history is remarkable, particularly as Spain most probably had the largest black population in Renaissance Europe (Martín Casares 2005). Regardless of the fact that black Africans have been a significant element in the Spanish population for centuries, their importance has never been recognised. However, this phenomenon is not particular to Spain. It touches most South American and Caribbean countries where the slave trade was the most common source of labour. Consequently, we can state that the black African heritage has not been sufficiently taken into account in the Hispanic world. Regarding this, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán points out that the academic world does not pay adequate attention to this line of research, and claims that most ethnological studies in Mexico are focused on the memory of the indigenous populations, while black African contributions to the culture are rejected or not taken into account (2001: 153). At the same time, as he demonstrates, it is hard to qualify a cultural trait that is present nowadays as 'African' because strong evidence does not always exist.

To study the heritage of black African culture in Spain is even more complex than in some countries of Latin America. In Spain, there were no plantations and blacks lived isolated in their master's houses, largely devoted to domestic service. There is also the fact that in America, including some parts of Mexico, sub-Saharanans were a significant element of the population until the 19th century, while in Spain their number descended drastically from the 18th century onwards.

Nonetheless, traces of black African culture in Spain can be tracked down through different sources, for example, toponymy. In Andalusia, it is still relatively common to find names of streets and places that refer to people from sub-Saharan origin, such as the *barranco de los negros* (ravine of blacks) or *callejón de Guinea* (Guinea alley) in Granada. But even in contemporary Spanish, we use proverbs and colloquial expressions that refer

clearly to the presence of a black African population in Spain, for example, *merienda de negros* (literally ‘blacks’ tea-party’), an idiom meaning bedlam or free-for-all. This phrase appears for the first time in the *Dictionary of the Royal Academy* in 1734, and it was defined as follows: ‘To confuse and muddle a business or dependence, with the purpose of making off with the profits, to the detriment of those sharing in it’. This definition appeared in three successive editions of the said dictionary during the 18th century and also during the 19th century (in the seven editions published between 1803 and 1869). But in 1884, *merienda de negros* was newly defined as: ‘fig. and fam. Confusion and disorder in which no one understands each other’ and this later meaning was maintained until the latest edition, dated 2001.

Obviously place-names and common phrases are not the only sources for tracking down the black African presence in Spain. In this paper, we shall focus on the study of literary, historical and artistic data concerning the participation of sub-Saharanans in Spanish public dances and feasts, whether profane or devout. For this purpose, we have gathered information on the appearance of black Africans in popular celebrations from the end of the 16th century and throughout the following three centuries.

Sources for studying the heritage of black African culture in Spain

The Arabs had brought sub-Saharanans to Spain as slaves during medieval times and thus they were present in numerous literary and historical sources from Muslim Spain (Furio 2006: 260). The exploration of the west coast of the African continent by Europeans started in the second half of the 15th century when navigators and merchants of the Iberian Peninsula arrived in the area called *Guinea* in that time. Christians also captured them and brought them to the metropolis in order to sell them as slaves. Sub-Saharanans from diverse origins (Senegal, Gambia, Angola, Congo, etc) continued to be brought to Spain and its American colonies until the 19th century. Clearly, the role of black Africans in Spanish culture grows considerably in importance with the rise of the plantation economies in the colonies. Cuba imported more than one million enslaved Africans, from its origins as a Spanish colony in 1511 to the abolition of slavery in 1886. Most of them arrived between 1790 and 1867 at the height of Cuba’s sugar and coffee boom (despite Spain’s treaties with Britain outlawing the trade (Singleton 2001: 98). Thus, the memory of this black African population can be reconstructed through literary, historical and artistic sources.

Here, we shall focus on Spanish records relating to the participation of black Africans in music and dance, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries, because, it must be emphasised, at this time they were an important part of Iberian society, and represented a significant portion of the population of such cities as Seville, Cadiz or Granada. With regard to literature, we can find references to sub-Saharan characters performing instruments, singing or dancing in numerous Castilian literary sources. Indeed, one of the first poems about blacks, written by Rodrigo de Reynosa (1520), dealt with the subject of African fondness for music and dance (Lawrence 2005). Comba, the female protagonist, affirms that she knows how to sing, and Jorge, her suitor, says that he can dance the

guineo beautifully, in a clear invitation to sexual intercourse. In fact, the guineo was a very popular dance rooted in sub-Saharan traditions and its definition was already included in one of the first dictionaries of the Castilian language. The guineo was defined as ‘a dance of quick and prompt movements, may have been brought from Guinea and is danced by blacks’ (Covarrubias 1674: 45). In the 18th century, this definition was enlarged and it was said that it was also composed of ‘ridiculous and indecent gestures’ and it was considered a genuine black dance, ‘the reason for it being called by this name’ (Diccionario Académico 1734).

In Golden Age of Spanish literature, blacks were brave and admired protagonists of a number of popular theatre plays based on historical black characters, such as the freedman Juan Latino, who was a professor of Latin (Martín Casares and Barranco 2008). But they were also secondary characters, generally comic types, and victims of ferociously racist parodies. Most of these despised, stereotyped characters were part of the *entremeses*, short plays that took place during the comedies. Characters of sub-Saharan origin living in Spain also appeared in *mojigangas*, very short plays that were performed in public celebrations, written to make the audience laugh, in which ridiculous and outlandish figures were introduced, especially animals. Black Africans were also present in short novels and ballads. They generally spoke *habla de negros* (black speech), changing *r* for *l*, since most of them had arrived in Spain as adolescents or adults and spoke with a strong accent (de Chasca 1946). Naturally, Castilian was the lingua franca of black Africans living in Spain since they had no common language, coming as they did from different ethnic groups. The most celebrated Spanish authors from the Golden Age, such as Miguel de Cervantes or Lope de Vega, were experts on writing ‘black speech’, also called *media lengua* (half language). In contrast to Cervantes, whose image of sub-Saharan people may have been coloured by the fact that he was captured by Arabs and experienced slavery, Quevedo is an example of applying the cruellest racial stereotypes to Africans.

However, the stereotype of black Africans as music and dance-lovers was widely spread not only in Renaissance Spain but in the rest of Europe (Lowe 2005: 35). Miguel de Cervantes stated that there is a natural tendency for blacks to become musicians in one of his novels, *El celoso extremeño* (The Jealous Extremaduran). In this comedy, Luis, a black stableman determined to learn how to play the guitar, is an enthusiast of music. The same stereotype appears in *El famoso negrito hablador* (The Famous Chattering Little Black) by Luis Quiñones de Benavente, written to be presented at Christmas and *Corpus Christi* at the Court, 1664. The ‘chattering’ little black demonstrates his love of music and dancing from his first appearance in the play, coming into sight when he hears a street parade. At the end of Benavente’s play, the ‘little black’ promises to be silent provided that he is allowed to sing and dance. A similar story is reported in the short play by Tirso de Molina, *El negro* (The Black Man) from 1630.

We can find other examples in: a) *La novia negra* by Lope de Rueda, where Polo is in love with a black woman called Fulgencia, and when he sees her singing a ballad, he exclaims: ‘How totally absorbed she is in the music!’ (*Qué embebida está con la música*), b) *Boda de negros del Puerto de Santa María*, a ballad where a black man called Tomás

courts a Guinean woman playing instruments and singing at her door, and also in, c) *Los negros*, a short play by Simón Aguado, where the protagonists, Gaspar and Dominga, are musical enthusiasts, and there is another black musician called Antón, a friend of Gaspar's. There is even evidence of the participation of black Africans in theatrical plays performed at Royal Palaces, such as the play presented in Aranjuez in 1622 by the Queen and her ladies to celebrate the birthday of Philip IV. The play was entitled *La gloria de Niquea*, and the dualism of day and night, good and bad, was symbolically represented by skin colour. A black Portuguese domestic serving the Queen played the part of *night* and Doña María de Aragón performed that of *day*. The lady of the night was dressed in a black gown with silver stars and the lady of the day wore a silver-white dress embroidered with pearls (Ferrer Valls 2000). The text specifies that the black maiden was a great singer. As a consequence, black African characters are often associated with music in literary sources since, as Kate Lowe points out, it was one of the skilled occupations 'permitted' to black Africans in Renaissance Europe (2005: 35).

Apart from literature, historical data is also an important source of information about the black African contribution to Spanish music and folklore. One can find reports of musicians, or popular feasts where black African dancers participated, in the municipal archives of numerous cities, particularly in the southern half of the Peninsula. Diego Ortíz de Zúñiga in 1677 relates that black Africans were treated with benevolence in Seville since the time of Henry III, being permitted to gather and participate in dances and feasts on public holidays. The entrances of Kings and Queens into Spanish cities, the celebrations of royal births and weddings, as well as the celebration of a queen's pregnancy, provide other interesting sources of material for restoring the memory of sub-Saharanans who lived in Spain.

For instance, to celebrate the pregnancy of Maria Luisa Gabriel de Saboya (wife of Felipe V) in Burgos in 1707, a parade was held presenting different characters who generally appeared in pairs; the eighth couple were two ladies representing Africa and Europe and the fourteenth pair was composed of two black men: a coachman and a cook. In fact, most slaves or freed black men worked as domestic servants at the time, and being a coachman or a cook was a usual form of employment for them. The lady representing Africa wore a black veil covering her face, her hair was gathered on her head and she held a bow and arrows on her shoulder. She wore scarlet clothes and carried an inscription saying that she did not fear her monsters as much as she feared the great *Filipo*, since he was the mightiest. The other couple representing black characters had smeared their hands and faces. The cook had put flour on his face to whiten it, and held a placard saying, 'The only white man is the one who serves the King as a black man' (*Que tan solo es hombre blanco / publico, y aun lo celebro, / quien sirve al Rey como un Negro*). Also, a *mojiganga* (Anonymous 1708) was composed to celebrate the arrival of the aforesaid Queen to Spain at the beginning of the 18th century. The chief character was a black woman dancer who related that she was born in Angola and came to Spain to make the life of black African men happier. Of course she spoke 'black speech', and the metaphors used to describe her were obviously racist, as she was compared to the devil, a chimney and a shadow. Other characters who appear in this short comedy, also being mocked, are a

Portuguese, a drunkard and a gypsy, and all of them sing and dance with the intention of pleasing the Queen.

Apart from literary and historical sources, we have also identified several paintings where black musicians are present. They are generally not very clearly seen, blended into the crowd since they represent ordinary village people. Most of them appear in paintings representing views of Spanish cities, but we have also noticed them in tiles depicting public celebrations or royal balls. Blacks playing instruments were represented in the painting of the masquerade organised at the Tobacco Factory to celebrate the coming of Ferdinand VI to the throne of Spain in 1747. There are also two black trumpeters painted on the tiles of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Osuna (Sevilla), in which there is an urban scene of a central street with images of a group of musicians (Méndez Rodríguez 2007: 464–465).

Black African Dances in Early Modern Spain

The variety of sources we have referred to provide numerous examples of the participation of enslaved, freed and free people of sub-Saharan origin in Spanish secular festivities and social life, but they also took part in religious celebrations such as *Corpus Christi*. Besides singing, dances were probably the most significant cultural feature characterising black Africans living in Spain. African dances appeared exotic and original to most Spaniards, and there is no doubt that they were well-liked and very popular among the average mass of impoverished people, gypsies and comedians. But the nobility were also fond of them, as we have shown. However, black dances were not only an exotic decorative addition to processions; they were also a means of creating group identity and solidarity.

While the cultural legacy of sub-Saharan Africa in terms of music has been better studied in Latin America and the Caribbean more generally, (Carpentier 1946; Ortiz 1975; Fryer 1998), it is too little known in Spain. The relationship with ancestral styles in sub-Saharan Africa has yet to be analysed, for even if we have a relative abundance of literary references, we cannot imply that because a performer was black, they were necessarily playing or dancing African music. Multidisciplinary studies incorporating an analysis of the actual musical forms are needed to gain a better knowledge of the subject.

However, we could assume that the black African population that arrived in Spain in Early Modern times brought their own musical traditions and that they must have had an influence on Spanish music and folklore. José Luis Navarro García (1998) gives us a number of literary examples that testify to the penetration of rhythms and styles. Initially, and throughout the 16th century, most black dances came from the African continent but later on, especially in the 18th century, a number of them were imported from the sub-Saharan population settled in the American colonies.

Two of the dances believed to be of African origin performed in Early Modern Spain were the *guineo* (already mentioned) and the *zarambeque*, which ‘was considered a very lively, boisterous dance’ (*que era considerada como una danza muy alegre y bulliciosa*) and ‘very common among Blacks’; it is connected with the *zambra*, a Moorish dance that was adopted by gypsies at a later date. We can also mention the *minuetes de*

guineo (Guinean minuets) or the *cadena de Congo* (Congo chain), with reference to black styles and performers.

In contrast, two of the most popular Baroque dances, the *zarabanda* (sarabande) and the *chacóna* (chacónne), were also very popular among black Africans. According to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), the *zarabanda* originated during the 16th century in Latin America and Spain, and from there it spread to Italy, France and Germany in the 17th century; the *chacóna* was originally a dance-song, it seems, in Latin America, and became popular in Spain early in the 17th century. Thus, we could perhaps consider a possible black African origin or influence. José Luis Navarro (1998) analyses these possible black African origins in the same way as he has for other dances mentioned in various sources, such as the *paracumbé*, *dengue*, *manguindoy*, *cachumba* or *gayumbo*. Their names are clearly reminiscent of West African dialects, and it is also clear that music and dance must have constituted a means of expression for black Africans living in Early Modern Spain.

In general, African dances are described as physical and erotic by both secular and ecclesiastical authors. As a consequence, the Catholics hierarchy continuously denounced the great sensuality which characterised them. The moral speeches and ideological attitudes concerning black African dances were similar in both latitudes, in Spain and Latin America, since the Spanish Empire established itself as a guardian of Catholic morals. Nevertheless, they must have been so popular that ecclesiastical authorities allowed their inclusion in celebrations of a religious character like the *Corpus* Procession. The presence of black characters in the *Corpus Christi* procession has been documented from the 16th to the 19th century, but according to Garrido Atienza (1889: 26), the objective of limiting their sexual aspect and incitement to lust was never accomplished. In Granada, the *Corpus* procession opened with little devils, followed by the *Tarasca* and several chariots. Black dancers, along with the rest of the characters, represented disorder, sin and the devil (Navarro García 1998: 59). At the end of the procession, there were musicians playing different instruments, and dancers who performed during the breaks. These dances were divided into higher and lower categories: the *sarao* variety consisted of courtiers' dances whose executants were richly and elegantly dressed, while *cascabel* dances were 'inferiorly dressed, and characterised by shamelessness and freedom to execute movements and gestures typical of picaresque dances' (Garrido Atienza 1889: 90). In this second class, dances like the *zarabanda* could be performed. The author describes a procession in which black Africans dancers were dressed in green and gold, and played castanets and *dulzainas* (a popular folk instrument), and they were followed by a group composed of Galician women (1889: 92).

Nevertheless, the musical abilities of sub-Saharanans and their participation in various festive events was a target for mockery and derision, even though African dances attracted the interest of most sectors of the Spanish population. Eloy Martín relates that during the processions of black fraternities in Seville, the public frequently laughed at Guineans. A contemporary witness affirmed, '... the procession resembled a comedy rather than an act of devotion' (2000: 90).

Eloy Martín also states that chants and dances of African origin influenced Andalusian and Spanish dances and songs, including flamenco, in a process that is still barely known (2000: 89). However, the influence of African rhythms and dances on traditional folklore has lately been taken into account in different South American areas where Spaniards brought sub-Saharan slaves (Ortíz 1981; Aguirre Beltrán 2001). This recent interest should continue and contribute to the recognition of the African cultural heritage in Spanish culture.

Conclusion

Spain and Portugal had a direct relationship with West Africans due to the slave trade, in particular with the coast of the Gulf of Guinea. Thus, black Africans have been part of the Iberian population for centuries. The legacy of African culture in Spain can be recreated by social researchers through the study of literary, historical and artistic sources. Regarding the contribution of black Africans to Spanish folklore, it is clear that they performed their 'specific' dances (guineo, zarambeque, etc.) in public feasts and religious celebrations from the 15th to the 19th century. Spaniards perceived African rhythms and lyrics as exotic and sensual. Dances that were supposed to be of African origin were so popular in the south of Spain that they may have left traces in Andalusian folk music. Nevertheless, Guineans suffered strong racial discrimination due to the hierarchical ideology prevailing at the time. In fact, the musical abilities of black Africans and Spanish mulattos (slave, freed or free born), as well as their characteristic speech, were stereotyped and labelled as ridiculous by most sectors of society, even though a large part of the mass of poor people living in Spain did not enjoy much better social consideration than their black neighbours.

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