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The Remains of a Lost Culture –

Moorish *Zambra* in 16th Century Granada

In 1492 the catholic kings conquered Granada and the reign of the Moors ended. After that, it was just a question of time until also the Moorish culture of Andalusia became a target of this new catholic force. In the first years after the reconquest a so called capitulation file came into existence, which was supposed to secure the normal lives of the Granadian Moors. But already in 1498 they began with arrangements for the conversion of the Muslims. It was by that time that the first groups among them emigrated. There were people, who still believed that practicing their religion, culture and language under the Christian reign was possible. But by 1526 all Moors had been forced to convert to Christianity. These converted Moors were called Moriscos. The regents and the church wanted them to lay down every mannerism, that was connected to their old believe. Nevertheless the Moriscos continued to live their normal cultural life, partly in secret. Only Isabel of Portugal, the wife of Karl V., supported the culture of the Moriscos and attenuated the laws of 1526 against the Moriscos, in which the church wanted to forbid the Moorish music. The Moriscos themselves struggled against every ban and argued that their dances, songs and festivities did not insult or betray Christianity in any way and should therefore not be prohibited.

The term *zambra* is closely connected to these Moorish festivities. *Zambra* is an Arabic term and was originally used to describe the sounds made by a lively crowd and certain musical instruments. Ana Ruiz, author of *Vibrant Andalusia. The Spice of Life in Southern Spain* adds that 'it also signified a loud and animated party or celebration that was usually held outdoors, or a festival.' The dances of the Moriscos performed on

these occasions were also called *zambras*. Along with them came the *leilas*, traditional songs in Arabic. They were sung while dancing. Unfortunately the research today cannot make any statements about how the *zambras* had been danced or how the *leilas* sounded, because there are no historical sources for that. Nonetheless in some contemporary reports they were praised as the most artistic and famous dances in Spain. The only thing we can say for sure, is that the *zambras* were created in Southern Spain, as the Moriscos drew on the Andalusian and Moorish influences already present. And they remained exclusive to that part of the world, as they have not been found in any other Arabic country.

Ana Ruiz also specifies the instruments used by Moorish musicians at their festivals in that time. There were bagpipes and kettledrums, along with violins, tambourines and flutes. The dancers often wore bracelets and anklets with little bells or cymbals and the dances were accompanied by the sound of small high-pitched brass finger cymbals. In Spanish these are known as ‘chinchines’ or ‘platillos’.

The Music, as made in *zambras*, is also connected to Moorish weddings. The theologian Pedro Guerra watched the festivities that followed the weddings. He described, that the bride was received with music played on flutes, zithers and mandolins. For the procession on the streets trumpets and kettle-drums were sometimes used. After reaching the house people would begin to sing and dance. Basically one could say that they were having a *zambra*.

Although the Moorish culture was to be banned from Granada, the *zambras* of the Moriscos have found their way into the festivals of the Christians. Dancers and musicians were booked and paid to perform at festivities and even at court.

The following picture shows a tapestry from the early 16th Century of the reign of King Carlos V. He was a grandson of the catholic kings Ferdinand and Isabella and ruled Spain since 1516. This copy might be one of a bigger collection of Flemish tapestries that were made for the Burgundian Dukes. There are two people standing in the foreground, who do not really fit in: a dark-skinned musician with a kettledrum and a dancer. They are dressed very differently from the other pictured people and might be Moriscos.



Source: <<http://www.fusion-bellydance.com/zambra-mora.php>> 12.6.14.

Furthermore, in 1526 the German doctor Johannes Lange travelled to Spain and reported in his notes, that his master had been invited to see the ‘Morischken tantz’ in the palace gardens in Granada. He wrote that the dancers were wearing a lot of pearls and jewellery and that they danced in the typical way of their country, accompanied by lutes, violins and drums, played by three women. They sang with ‘ugly’ voices and were clapping hands.

Original German description from his journal:

Item auff den letzten tage zu Granathen hat der kayser meinen Gnedigen herren in den gatten unter dem schlosse gelegen zu besichtigen den Morischken tantz gefuret, welche alle mit sunderlichen gutten Perlein und edelm gestaine umb die Ören, Stirne und Arme getziret und geclaydet, fast wie bey der messe dyaconi, auff ires Landes art getantzt haben nach der Lautten, geygen und paucken, auff welchen 3 weyber bey funffzig, auch eine umb die viertzig jare alt gespiess haben und mit heßlicher pauerischen stymme darunder gesungen und etliche die hende ineinander zu frolocken geschlagen.

Source: Jesús Luque Moreno, *Granada en el siglo XVI. Testimonios de la época*, Granada 2013, p. 376.

A similar description was written by Christoph Weiditz. He was a German artist, who visited Spain in 1528 and 1529. In his book *Das Trachtenbuch des Christoph Weiditz von seinen Reisen nach Spanien (1529) und Niederlanden (1531/32)* he described and illustrated various cultures and their clothing. Here, two pages of his book can be seen, illustrating the clothing of Moorish people in the 16th Century.



Source: Christoph Weiditz, *Das Trachtenbuch des Christoph Weiditz von seinen Reisen nach Spanien (1529) und Niederlanden (1531/32)*, <<http://dlib.gnm.de/item/Hs22474/html>> 12.6.14.

The two handwritten sentences on the painting can be transcribed as followed: ‘Allo dantzen die morystgen mit ain ander schnölle mit den Fingern dar zue‘ (left side) and ‘das Ist das moristgis dantz spil schre dar zu wie die kelber‘ (right side).

Weiditz also wrote:

The Morisco musicians wear sandals and mimic the sound of castanets with their fingers as they dance with each other. One tambourine player wears a green cap with red trimming, a green jacket richly adorned in silver, a blue and red belt and a pocket decorated in gold with two golden buttons. The violinist wears a dark violet cap, a jacket in a rich red hue adorned in gold and his violin is brownish-yellow. The third musician wears a blue coat decorated in silver, with sleeves adorned with gold trim.

For a short time the Moriscos of Granada had even been a part of the Corpus Christi Procession. It was initialized by Archbishop Talavera. The Moriscos performed dances

that were similar to *zambras*. But because of the death of the bishop this particular tradition did not continue after 1507. These circumstances did not change in the last centuries. Also in the contemporary procession there are no Moorish or any other than Spanish traditions to see. However there are notable gaps between the different musical parts of the procession, which could have been filled with Moorish dance activities in the past. Especially, even if Flamenco musicians do take part, the art of dance does not exist in any form in the whole festivity of Corpus Christi Procession.

As already mentioned, in 1526 there were attempts to ban Moorish culture from Granada, because it was believed to assault Christianity. In 1566 and 1567 Felipe II. passed a new and a lot more bitter edict against the moors, prohibiting

[...] all rites, festivals, ceremonies and wedding celebrations of the Moors. [...] and [...] there will be no *zambras* nor *leilas* with Moorish musical instruments or songs of any form, even though through them, nothing is said or sung in these *zambras* against the Christian religion.

He also prohibited the use of the Arabic language and writing, their clothing, the use of Henna, their tradition of going to the baths and the holding of slaves by Moriscos.

Francisco Núñez Muley, the speaker of the Moriscos, responded to this. He was a notable citizen of Granada and of old Moorish nobility. His whole life he had been loyal to the crown and in service for the Christian kings and queens. In the past decades he had often been able to negotiate a certain *modus vivendi* with the regents. In his memorandum from 1567 he protested against the new law and argued:

Our weddings, *zambras* and festivities and all the other pleasures we're used to – nothing of that stops us from being Christians. I don't know, how someone could claim, that all of these are 'ceremonies of the Moors'. Neither in Africa nor in Turkey these *zambras* exist; they are local rites. If they were ceremonies of religion, they should exist everywhere.

Unfortunately Felipe II. did not react like the former kings. After 1567 *zambras* and *leilas* were forbidden for good. And until 1609 all Moriscos were displaced. Most of them were brought to North Africa. There are no information about *zambras* after the year 1610. There are rumours, that some Moriscos succeeded in finding a new home with the gypsies of Spain and that this connection eventually led to the *zambra gitana*, which is performed until today. And the celebrations of the Gypsies nowadays are also called *zambras*. But at present there is no historical evidence for that hypothesis.

Although the *zambras* of the Moriscos existed for quite a short time, they helped the Moorish citizens of Granada not to lose their cultural identity after the reconquest and in a wider context to keep the cultural melting pot of the city alive until today.

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Supplement

Original Spanish quote of the news laws of Felipe II.:

‘en bodas, velaciones y fiestas semejantes siguieran las costumbres cristianas, abriendo ventanas y puertas, sin hacer zambras ni leylas, con instrumentos y cantares moriscos, aunque éstos mo fueran contrarios al Christianismo.’

(Source: José Luis Navarro García, *Cantes y Bailes de Granada*, Málaga 1993, p. 18.)

Original quote of the answer of Don Francisco Núñez Muley:

‘Nuestras bodas, zambras y regocijos, y los placeres de que usamos, no impide nada al ser cristianos. Ni sé cómo se puede decir que es cerimonia de moros; [...] En African ni en Turquía no hay estas zambras; es costumbre de provincia, y se fuese cerimonia de seta, cierto es que todo habia de ser de una mesma manera.’

(Source: Don Francisco Núñez Muleys *Memorandum in der Überlieferung nach Luis del Mármol Carvajal: Historia del rebelión y castigo de los morsicos del reino de Granada*, Málaga 1600, Reprint Málaga 1991, p. 70.)