**‘I tear my shirt up’/‘أمزق قميصي’/‘Yo me rompo mi camisa’: Songs on the Verge of Madness**

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**Abstract:**

The long Arab presence in the Iberian Peninsula left significant marks which still surface in unexpected forms. My research investigates points of convergence between the Arab Middle Ages and contemporary Western culture. In this paper, I explore the theme of madness across Medieval Arab texts and the world and lyrics of flamenco, with the aim of elucidating and further understanding possible convergences. I use a cross-disciplinary, rhizomatic epistemological model adapted from the concept coined by Deleuze and Guattari that embraces the heterogenous quality of cultural experience and the nonbinary nature of knowledge and considers cultural manifestations as ‘rhizomes’ that run beyond hierarchical, closed systems and one-directional single narratives, producing a multitude of connections in any direction and with ‘anything other’. This approach is particularly fruitful where philosophy and religion, science and aesthetics, psychology and politics, and the social and anthropological forms have complex multiplanar entanglements, as is the case in the present study. The image of tearing one’s shirt up from the title, common to medieval Arabic and contemporary Spanish flamenco cultures, alludes to paroxysm or mental derangement from overwhelming emotion or intense aesthetic experience (ṭarab) and is one example from my initial findings that will be discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** madness, Medieval Arab, flamenco, singing, ṭarab, duende, rhizomatic, cross-cultural.

**’/‘I tear my shirt up’أمزق قميصي :‘Yo me rompo mi camisa’/‘أغاني على حافة الجنون**

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**ملخص:**

ترك وجود العرب في شبه جزيرة أيبيريا علامات واضحة لا زالت آثارها تظهر بأشكال غير متوقعة. يستكشف هذا البحث نقاط الإلتقاء بين الثقافة العربية في العصور الوسطي والثقافة الغربية المعاصرة و يتمحور حول موضوع الجنون كما يظهر في النصوص العربية من ذلك العصر والتشابه بينه وبين عالم الفلامنكو و كلمات أغانيه. وتستخدم الباحثة نموذج تحليل بيني يعتمد علي النموذج المعرفي الذي طرحه الفيلسوف الفرنسي ديلوز والذي يتبنى فهمًا متنوعًا للتجربة الثقافية و الطبيعة غير الثنائية للمعرفة ويتعامل مع الظواهر الثقافية بوصفها قوي جذمورية –أي كالساق التي تنمو التي تنمو أفقيا مقاومةً للشكل الهرمي المتجذر– هذه القوى تتحدي النظم المغلقة والسرديات الأحادية مما ينتج عنه روابط متعددة في اتجاهات متشعبة مع كل ما هو مختلف. وهذا المنهج يكون مثمراً حين تتداخل الاعتبارات الفلسفية و الدينية، أو العلمية والجمالية، أو النفسية والسياسية، أو الاجتماعية و الأنثروبولوجية بشكل متعدد المستويات كما هو الحال في هذا البحث. وتشير صورة تمزيق القميص التي ترد في العنوان الي أعراض الجنون و الهيستيريا التي تنتج عن المشاعر الغامرة أو التجربة الجمالية المتمثلة في الطرب، وهذه تعد إحدى النتائج التي توصل لها هذا البحث.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الجنون، العرب في العصور الوسطى، الفلامنكو، الغناء، طرب، دويندي، جذمورية، عبر الثقافات.

**Introduction**

There is a reason why the connection between Medieval Arab and flamenco cultures is far from being a random choice. Indeed, Arab culture could not but leave a mark after inhabiting the territory that we now call Spain for nearly 800 years. The process of cultural erasure that followed the conquest and unification of the Iberian Peninsula by the Catholic monarchs Isabel and Fernando in their effort to forge one kingdom with one language and one religion was vigorous but did not delete all traces of Arab culture. This not only had an impact on architecture, the arts, science and technology, agriculture, philosophy, and literature but also permeated into aspects of everyday life from customs to language. It lives on in words we constantly use, from the noun for ‘female’, ‘hembra’, to the pronoun ‘usted’, originally ‘master’; or the name for our most international and iconic instrument, the guitar, the Spanish version of Arabic ‘qitar’, in turn, borrowed from Persian ‘sehtar’ (‘three strings’), the very word for the madman in Spanish, ‘loco’, is itself part of the Arab heritage (Corriente 30). Many cultural elements, however, went underground under the force of persecution, and despite surviving at times, the loss of their cultural context has deprived us of their original meaning and turned them into habits without an apparent explanation, often distorted beyond recognition, hidden in expressions that nowadays sound nonsensical. Such is the case of the ‘nana, nanita’ from the Andalusi Arabic ‘nām, nām, nām īnta’ (‘sleep, sleep, sleep, you’) still sang as a lullaby or ‘carabí hurí carabí hurá’ in children’s songs that inadvertently echoes the Andalusi Arabic ‘kārbi urī, kārb yurā’ (‘my grief has been seen, my grief will be seen’) (Corriente 34), revealing a continuity that transgresses cultural and temporal borders.

**Cultural Rhizomes**

The borders are indeed there, but some particularly resilient cultural elements, which, borrowing and adapting the term from Deleuze and Guattari (Thousand Plateaus), I will call ‘rhizomes’, find a way to bypass or trespass them. Rhizomes, in this study, therefore, will refer to those elements that not only override borders of culture (Arab/Western) and time (medieval/contemporary) but also divide lines of domains, disciplines, semantic fields, and even ontological categories and hierarchies. My aim is to identify and analyze rhizomes and their multiplanar networking in a forensic effort to demonstrate a ‘mongrel’ culture (‘mongrel’ as a positive force against stagnation, prejudice, racism, and ‘eraism’, the narrow conception of our time as the measure of reality).

In the face of rising nationalism and extreme right perceptions, the study of these traces as part of Western identity is crucial. In the context of flamenco music, even though some voices have, from time to time, vindicated the Arab influence, there is still remarkable resistance to fully acknowledge this, and when it is recognized, there is often a generalized vagueness as to what, where, and how this influence plays out today. My research aims to gather evidence of cross-cultural connections that might have gone unnoticed; details are taken from diverse disciplines and aspects of culture which may seem trivial at first sight when taken in isolation, but which demonstrate their significance, as in forensic science, by contextual, relational, and cumulative effect.

**1. Rhizomes of Madness: Insanity in Medieval Arab Literature**

Cultural rhizomes not only transgress the boundaries of time and culture but also trespass the borders that divide domains, disciplines, semantic fields, and ontological categories. Before examining the musical ambit, it is worth first taking a look at the theme of madness in Medieval Arab culture, starting with one of the best-known literary sources, *Alfa Layla wa Layla* or *The Thousand and One Nights* (Thousand Nights 1–29), where we find Abou Hassan who, to his mother’s despair, seems to have become completely delusional and believes himself to be the Commander of the Faithful. Unlucky him, for he misses out on the benefit of the soundest medical care that was available during the Middle Ages at one of the *maristans* in Baghdad (five in the 3rd H/10th CE century), or from the gentle method of ‘psychological persuasion’ practiced by Awhad al-Zaman al-Baladī to treat hallucination. Instead, poor Abou Hassan endures three weeks of harsh chastisement for his delusions in a dodgy madhouse, where there is no attempt to enquire into what Abou claims to have experienced and ascertain whether there is any veracity in it. Of course, the readers know all along that Abou Hassan is not really mad but the victim of the Caliph’s pranks. Abou has been drugged up and duped for the entertainment of the ruler and played with as if he were a mere puppet of a shadow play. A little reflection leads us to reexamine who really is more insane in the story, whether it is not in fact the bored Caliph who drugs and tricks Abou Hassan and the system that treats mental illness by punishment, having first sidestepped investigation of his claims and circumstances before throwing a diagnosis and treatment which is more like a sentence. One may question which is the most harmful derangement, whether Abou’s delusions or the Caliph’s ennui and unethical self-pleasing. And if Abou Hassan is to be declared mad, should it not rather be on the grounds of his feckless living, greed, and frivolity? Under this scrutiny, the line between sanity and insanity is not only revealed to be thin but also greatly the result of social construct.

In another anonymous Arab manuscript, a sequel of the *Alfa Layla wa Layla* published in modern times under the title *Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*, Caliph Harun al-Rashid himself appears as a character wandering the streets of Baghdad at night in the guise of a commoner to distract himself from the depression that robs him of his sleep. The same manuscript contains a story where a king finds no option but to lock and shackle his precious daughter, who is afflicted by “an illness that led her to eat the flesh of her own arms” (Tales 168). Reported cases of autophagia, generally related to severe mental illness such as schizophrenia (Michopoulos I), are extremely rare, and the image of eating one’s flesh is certainly not one that tends to appear in Western literature, let alone songs. Yet, it somehow has worked its way into flamenco lyrics, where it is mentioned in flamenco as a sign of derangement caused by grief, as in “*Corre y pregúntale a un sabio/cuál de los dos perdió más: si el que comió de sus carnes, /o el que publicó su mal*”[[1]](#endnote-1) (“Hurry and ask the sage who lost the most, whoever ate his own flesh or made his woes public”). It raises the question of whether this is a mere coincidence or indeed a trope that has threaded itself through the enmeshed weave of popular culture, a rhizome passing down generations and crossing from one medium to another, in the space of oral tradition where stories dwell, as do flamenco lyrics. Further consideration of the text in which it appears will prevent us from dismissing it as a petty detail. The reference to the fear of one’s woes becoming public knowledge, frequently associated with ‘the gossip’ and ‘the slanderer’, is often found in both flamenco and the Arab literature of Al-Andalus, recipient of the earlier Middle Eastern tradition. This is exemplified by Ibn Hazm al-Qurtubī’s *The Ring of the Dove* (*El collar de la Paloma*) (5th H/11th CE century) and a rich corpus of sapiential works also developed in Iberia under Arab influence including *Calila e Dimna*, *Barlaam e Josafat*, *Sendebar*, andtranslations from Arabic of *Secret of Secrets* (*Sirr and al-Asrar*) by Yaḥya ibn al Batrik circa 183 H/800 C, the *Book of Good Proverbs* (*Libro de los Buenos Proverbios*), translated from Hunayn ibn Ishaq’s 3rd H/9th CE century compilation *Kitab adab al-falasifa*, or the *Book of Selected Maxims and Aphorisms (Kitāb mukhtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsin al-kalim) by Abul Wafa Al Mubassir Ibn Fatik* in the 5th H/11th CE century, which first appeared in Spanish in the 13th century as *Bocados de Oro*. The figure of the sage, which in the above lyrics serves as a foil to the idea of insanity, embedded itself in the popular imaginary, from where flamenco lyrics so often drink. Hypermobile elements (cultural rhizomes), in essence, had in turn infiltrated Arab culture from the Persian, Indian, and Greek cultures, creating a connective tissue that surfaces even today.

**2. Rhizomes of Madness across Overridden Boundaries**

**2.1. The Insanity of Love: Rhizomes Like Thrown Stones**

Rather than dwelling on these injurious forms of insanity, I will focus on manifestations of madness that crossover the lines of the positive and the negative, which cross over boundaries of defined categories. The kind of lunacy that I will consider lives in intimacy with sublime sentiments and elevated thoughts, forming with them an inseparable amalgam, a mongrel phenomenon. Such is the case with the madness of love. In the context of Medieval Arab culture, it is difficult to think of love and lovers without evoking Majnun, the man and poet Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, who would become known as the ultimate lover and ultimate madman, having lost his mind for Layla. The formula takes on different names: a different Qays (ibn Dhurayh), losing his for Lubna; Muraqqish for Asma; 'Urwah for 'Afra; Al-Muhallaq for Tarjuj. Moreover, there was a multitude of ‘Majnuns’ in the Banu ‘Amir tribe, among them Muzahim ibn al-Harith and Muʿadh ibn Kulayb, falling for a multitude of Laylas. When al-Asmaʿi (d. circa. 213 H/828 CE) asked a Bedouin Arab about Majnun, the reply came back: “Which one do you mean? For amongst us there was a whole lot accused of insanity” (Al-Asfahanī 2: 8), and, apparently, all of them were mad about Layla. This ‘love madness’ personified by Majnun turned into a highly charged motif, a rhizome that managed to survive the passage of time and trespassed territorial and cultural frontiers, famously reaching Persia through Niẓāmi Ganjavi’s *Leili o Majnun*, which in due time would become the inspiration behind the rock hit ‘Layla’ by British rock star Eric Clapton. (Menocal) Besides this long, two-step leap from Arab to Persian to English, the rhizome followed another route, moving through literature by way of Nizami’s rendition, it poured into Turkish with Gülşehrī, ‘Āşik Paşa, Şāhidī and Fuzūlī (Kalpaklī), and according to Agah Sirri Levend, it fertilized the West as a result of contacts during the crusades, reaching French culture through Tristan and Yseult as well as Aucassin and Nicolette, Hungarian through Floire and Blancheflor, and English through the story of Romeo and Juliet with Arthur Brooke’s poem and William Shakespeare’s play (Akcan 18) (Levend viii). The rhizome does not keep course on a single linear path or plane. From literary works, it seeped into the arts, and by the mid-9th H/16th CE century, it had inspired Persian and Ottoman miniatures with scenes from the Majnun and Layla story not relayed by the written works but maybe carried in the oral tradition. These images are particularly important for this study, as they illuminate a trope traveling cultures and connecting flamenco with Medieval Arab culture: the throwing of stones. In one of the Persian illustrations by Mir Sayyid Ali inspired by the Nizami text (1540) (Mir Sayyid), a group of children are seen pelting stones at Majnun, who, hand-tied and with a rope around his neck like a beast, is brought back to the camp. Another anonymous Ottoman miniature has Majnun, half-naked and emaciated, among horse-mounted warriors confronting those of Layla’s tribe. However, unlike the battle-ready riders wielding sabers against the enemy tribe, Majnun is throwing stones at them. Stones thrown, by the world at the mad and by the mad at the world, is an image also used in flamenco culture centuries later in connection with madness, as we will see more closely further on.

**2.2. The Insanity of the Mystic**

Besides Majnun the lover, another type of proverbial lunatic comes to challenge social perceptions of insanity: the mystic. Both the lover and mystic are seized by a kind of madness which is a gift as much as a curse, which saves as it condemns. The lover and the mystic, in truth nothing other than a lover as well, are spared from a life of dull indolence and apathy, drabness, and banality. And if they are ‘lunatics’, it is because they inhabit the terrestrial realm as if loaded with the energy of a mind-altering lunar lodestone. The lover of a human (any version of Majnun) and the lover of God (the mystic) are defined by their intensity. Insanity works against inanity. The mystic and the love-mad bear a certain aura of bliss, but there is risk in embracing this blessed insanity. The mad become outcasts, outsiders of respectable society. Against the fool for God and the fool for love, as against birds eating the fruit on the tree, as against Iblis, stones are thrown. The mystic Ramon Llull, who lived across the Christian and Muslim cultures, was stoned to death in Tunis for preaching the union of opposites, for believing that truth dwells in contradictions, like in those ‘autoantonyms’ or *aDhdaad* (أضْداد) in Arabic, which means one thing and its complete opposite, such as *akhfā*, أخفى, meaning ‘to manifest’ as well as ‘to conceal’. Ibn 'Arabi’s mystical teachings, filled with the sense that God’s love manifests itself in many forms, were also dismissed as madness (Menocal 87), and in fact, a fatwā was called to have his works *Fusūs al-Hikam* and *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya* burnt or washed to efface the writing (Morris 249). We will return to the theme to discuss another of these God’s fools and their holy foolery later on.

**2.3. The Insanity of Music**

An intensity bordering on, or plunging into, derangement is also found, time and again, in the context of music, in both the Medieval Arab context and flamenco. We find it infiltrating three different planes: aesthetics, identity, and lyrics. There is a form of aesthetic insanity that seizes even the wisest and soundest minds. We encounter fools who were perfectly sane until carried away by uncontrollable emotions stirred by music. Arab culture is familiar with the aesthetic paroxysm known as ṭarab, which can find an equivalent in flamenco ‘jondura’ (depth) or ‘duende’ (literally meaning ‘spirit’ or ‘jinn’) and involves an emotional intensity that moves spirit and mind and can manifest itself powerfully in bodily reactions. It can exist in the singer or musician when performing alone, but it also has the power to affect the listener, to the extent of creating an electrifying emotional entanglement between them, or, crucially for our case on madness, more like a power surge leading to a short-circuit. Ṭarab is most clearly manifest through the drastic effects that the music can have on listeners at times. The *Kitab Al-Aghanī* or *Book of Songs*, compiled in the 10th century by Abu al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, provides a multitude of anecdotes that serve as illustrations.

**2.3.1. Insanity in Aesthetics. ‘I tear my shirt up’/‘أمزق قميصي’/‘Yo me rompo mi camisa’: A Rhizome at Work**

Caliph Al-Walid is the subject of a number of these scenes, in volumes 1 and 3 of the *Kitab al-Aghani* (al-Iṣfahānī), such as those prompted by the singing of Atarrad, a mawla of Ansar said to be a decorated sire and a jurist, though a similar anecdote is given of the singer Ma’bad Ibn Wahb, mawla of Abdul Rahman bin Qatar, brought from Medina by Al-Walid (1: 62). On a certain occasion, Al-Walid, who is relaxing by the edge of a shallow pool filled with wine, is so emotionally charged by the singing, where he rips his robe and, stark naked, throws himself into the pool (1: 63). Atarrad is made to swear he will keep the incident secret, but, later, he is called back to the Caliph’s presence, and the intensity of the emotion again triggers a frenzied response with the Commander of the Faithful dramatically tearing his robe, leaping into the pool, and drinking himself unconscious. This time, Atarrad is sent away with a threat, a mule, and a thousand dinars to shut his mouth (3: 272), an indication that the Caliph has not altogether parted with his senses as he is conscious that his behavior was out of order and the effect of the Attarad’s song. Not that the singer had the exclusivity to arouse extreme ṭarab; on another occasion, Al-Walid’s loss of control on hearing the singing of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad Ibn ʿĀʾisha ended up in a scene of audacious sexual behavior.

We also hear of the great singer and composer Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, a leading musician at the Baghdad court in the late 8th century, whose singing so moved Caliph Musa al-Hadī that he pulled at his coat till he ripped it, then the tunic underneath, and finally, the shirt he was wearing against his skin, baring his chest for everyone there to see (3: 305). Another accomplished singer, Ibn Jundab, drove Abu al-Sa’ib al-Makhzumī out of his mind with his song to the extreme that al-Makhzumī threw himself into the well (16: 374). A similar frenzy came over an old man who jumped into the Euphrates when hearing a female slave sing (9: 333). I will finally mention Abu Rayhana al-Madanī, who begged the singer al-Waseet to sing for him and, overcome with emotion, not only did he rip his one and only shirt, but also slapped himself till he bled from his nose and fainted (6: 165). That this behavior was not normalized, despite the number of times that appears mentioned, is shown by people’s amazement, even outrage, at the utter foolishness of it. Certain manifestations of Ṭarab recorded in the *Kitab al-Aghani* may resemble drunkenness or the psychotic effects of drugs, with listeners having the impression that they were flying (for instance, with a song by al-Dalāl, 4: 38), that the earth was shaking, the mountains and trees were singing, and that the walls, doors, or even the bodily organs or clothes of the listeners were answering the singer (Sawa, 2019, 301).

Compared to the blood-shedding and jumping into pools and rivers, tearing one’s clothes may not sound so dramatic but, among the recorded manifestations of ṭarab, it is one which is wonderfully illuminating in terms of the connections with flamenco culture. The stripping of garments as a form of mourning existed as an ancient Arab and Hebrew tradition and therefore seems to have been common across several Semitic peoples, which may have been a manifestation of religious ritual and worshipping not only related to funeral practices (Jastrow 25). Majnun also ripped his clothes, driven, one would think, by the intensity of his unfulfilled love, but he declares his gesture a liberation from the binaries of matter and spirit, and of life and death, and so, I would suggest, a transcending of both sanity and insanity: “He stretched his hand and tore his clothing, saying: What does this dead man to do with a shroud?/He who sets his throne outside the two worlds, /how can he be contained in a garment?” Chapter 18:2-3 (Asghar 101). It lends itself to an interpretation in harmony with Sufi spirituality, where the humiliation of the body through ragged clothing or nakedness, poverty, and endurance of need goes hand in hand with moral and intellectual self-effacement in the embracing of madness—or what to the world appears as such.

What we find also in the act of garment tearing, literal or as a reference, is an expression of ecstasy or aesthetic-emotional rapture. We need to look at the margins rather than the mainstream and examine it as one of those cultural rhizomes that have survived the erasure inflicted by persecution and the one-sided narrative of ethnic, religious, and cultural uniformity. Shirt-ripping is still acted out in gypsy wedding rituals in Spain, as a display of celebration, where it is followed by the singing of *yeli*, *yeli*, which either derived from the Arab *Luyaylāti*, that is, the ‘sweet nights’, or the *layali*, the vocal prelude to classical Arab songs, or indeed both; in any case, another consequence of the close contact of gypsies with *moriscos* in hiding during times of persecution (Pezzi 25–28) (Domínguez Ortiz and Vincent 264) and with the Muslims captured and enslaved during the conflicts with North Africa (Barrio Gozalo 48, 138) (Cabrillana). The shirt-ripping and ‘yeli yeli’ singing in gypsy weddings are a public expression of euphoria. In flamenco culture, one may not see anybody actually ripping their clothes, but the expression referring to tearing one’s shirt has become a metaphor to describe the power of flamenco singing to communicate ‘deep feeling’, *jondura* (we might say, ‘soul’). It is associated with the most authentic, *jondo* (deep) flamenco, undiluted by commercial interests. In situ, during the performance, we won’t see anyone actually tearing their shirt, but we will hear manifestations of emotional intensity caused by the music: the exclamations *¡ole!*, *¡ele!* and *¡agua!*,replicas of *Allah!* and *Aiwa!* heard at Arab musical get-togethers and performances, such as those of Adib al-Dayekh or Sabri Moudallal or young Ḥaidr Ḥameed, singing the mawwal ‘Why do you blame me?’ while playing his Iraqi oud in a grocery store surrounded by his friends and supporters, exactly as if it was a flamenco gathering in Jerez de la Frontera, Utrera, or Lebrija, where they are called the ‘cabales’, I daresay a derivation of Arabic ‘qabila’, the tribe. In flamenco, listeners may get carried away and also stand up, bang tables, shout out ‘te quiero’ (‘I love you’) or ‘mi alma’ (‘my soul’, a parallel to Arabic ‘ya, ruhī!), or call out the names of their performers or their mothers. They may later describe the singing with the idiom ‘pa’ partirse la camisa’, ‘enough to rip one’s shirt’. There is even a YouTube channel called, precisely, *Pa’ partirse la camisa*, which compiles videos of what they regard as highly inspired flamenco singing. The image of ‘tearing one’s shirt’ has become, in the context of flamenco, a symbol of benign, transitory delirium, recognized as a hallmark of aesthetic excellence and authenticity in the music. In flamenco, as in Medieval Arab singing, the best singing makes the listeners, so to speak, lose their minds, by canceling out the sense of time, all trivial cares, and worldly concerns and exciting a form of musical ecstasy. The intense focus and heightened aesthetic emotion can become, for both performers and listeners, cathartic and thus healing.

There is no space here to expand on ṭarab as I would like to, but I do recommend the studies by Ali Jihad Racy, Jonathan H. Shannon, Darin Kahel, Karen Moukheiber, and George Sawa among others, as well as primary sources *Kitab Al-Aghanī*, the 3 H/10th century by Abu al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, Ibn Ḥayyān’s *al-Muqtabis*, and the *Kamāl ādāb al-ghinā’* by Al-Ḥasan al-Kātib. Of particular interest is al-Ghazalī, as he specifically addresses the disruptive effect of music in the second part of his *Kitab al-ādāb al samā’ wa-al-wajd*, entitled ‘The practices of samāʻ and its effects on the heart through *wajd*, and on the limbs by dance, shrieking, and tearing of the clothes’, which may sound strange but will later show to be of great relevance to this study. Al-Farabī, who laid out his detailed examination of the science of music in his Kitab al-Mūsiqa al-Kabir, does not address ṭarab explicitly, but he is reported in the anonymous *Kashf al-Humum w-al-Kurub fi Sharh Alat al-Tarab* (*Survey of the Concerns and Anxieties in the Explanation of the Instruments of Music*) to have used his profound knowledge of music to manipulate the emotions of the audience beyond their own control, thus proving his mettle as a ṭarab practitioner. Like ṭarab, the aesthetic-emotional flamenco trance, sometimes referred to as *duende* (a word perhaps linked to *jinn*), can evoke the Sufi experience of spiritual rapture called *sukr*, ‘holy inebriation’. Perhaps, it is not a coincidence that one of the deepest, most intense, and trance-like forms of flamenco song and closest to Arab singing (especially the *mawwal*) is called *seguiriya* or *siguiriya*. It may be that the hidden, outlawed *sukr* in its Andalusian diminutive form *sukiriyya* pulled into its orbit the term *seguidilla*, which referred in Spanish folklore to a type of stanza and song that looked or sounded nothing like the flamenco *seguiriya*. And perhaps this *sukr*, which shares its root with the Arabic word for sugar, explains the exclamation *¡azúcar!* (‘sugar’) also heard in flamenco performances, as a result of confusion among people who were in the process of forgetting the Arabic language and its culture.

**2.3.2. Insanity as Identity: Holy Fools of Flamenco**

In common with Arab music, flamenco cultivates a sense of emotional authenticity and intensity, often referred to as ‘jondura’ (‘profundity, deepness’), with manifestations that can appear close to derangement. This is reflected in the aesthetic and performative domain, as we have seen, and also in relation to identity. There is a striking frankness in the flamenco culture regarding the mental instability and eccentricities of flamenco figures, who can be perceived as endowed with an aura of quasi-mystical lunacy, of being ‘touched’ by the supernatural, ‘tocao del age’ (‘touched by the angel’), as the flamenco expression goes. The oddities of these unhinged geniuses are not only acknowledged but often flagged in connection with their uncanny musical gift. To give a few examples of these ‘raros’ (‘odballs’), as they are frequently referred to, the legendary Manuel Torre was known to have a pathological obsession with greyhounds, fighting roosters and watches (Ríos Ruiz 49–55), and, less endearingly, his lack of self-control led him to take his own son’s wife with whom she had five children. Tomás Pavón, one of the greatest ever singers and brother to Pastora Pavón (the Umm Kulthum of flamenco), renounced a successful career because of his phobia of social interaction and recalcitrant attitude to performing for an audience and for money (Bohórquez Casado, Tomás Pavón – El Príncipe de la Alameda 283–296). This has been, in fact, a common occurrence among flamenco singers, with a good number of them refusing to sing as professionals, rejecting opportunities to record, and turning down payment for their singing. The phenomenal guitarist Niño Miguel, one of the great geniuses of flamenco guitar, as others who demonstrated exceptional musical abilities and evident social awkwardness, probably fell within the autistic spectrum and suffered from severe maladaptation and mental ailments all his life (Gómez Cruz) (Ameline). The celebrated singer ‘El Chozas’ was renowned for his outlandish, even surrealist lyrics, which he would invent on the spot, and where he switched gender self-reference in mid-song, something very unusual in his time. Juanichi el Manijero, whose singing inspired awe, was reported to be a human being “brimming with oddities and eccentricities” according to Antonio Mairena (Martín Martín 7). The gifted singer El Carbonerillo displayed erratic and self-destructive behavior and once threw a bottle at the head of his former fiancé when she came to see him perform and asked him to dedicate a song to her (Yerga Lancharro 41).[[2]](#endnote-2) Eccentric behavior seems to have prevailed in flamenco, and a good few artists have been labeled ‘peculiar’ even by their friends and family. Many of them have squandered all they earned, eager to prove they had no attachment to material gains, and have died in penury. Singer Pepe el de la Matrona on more than one occasion got up from a meal with other flamenco artists saying that he was going to have a coffee (or a shave!) in Cuba, which he did, after making his wife sell all their furniture to buy a ticket for the ship passage (Ortiz Nuevo 104). The creation of the *bulería*, one of the most prolific genres of flamenco, is attributed to Loco Mateo (Mad Mateo), a man of crippling sensitivity who would break down in tears over the lyrics he sang. Intriguingly, the *bulería* is the liveliest and more energetic of the flamenco ‘palos’ (song styles, based, like Arab music, on particular melodic modes and rhythmic patterns), but he introduced it as the closing of somber, tragic songs, perhaps as a way to lighten the mood and control the emotional tone while at the same time producing a strange destabilizing effect. Bearing in mind that this type of shift in rhythm and modal register is actually practiced in Arab classical music, it is worth asking ourselves whether this is a mere coincidence or a surviving rhizome of a musical tradition that was suppressed but not annihilated.

Madness seems to be celebrated in flamenco. In the sphere of ‘baile’ (dance), dancer Israel Galván created a show called *Zapatos Rojos* (*Red Shoes*) in honor of Félix el Loco, who lost his mind and died in a Psychiatric Hospital in Epsom (UK) after a successful career in Diaghilev’s company (Navarro García 28-29). The list of ‘strange creatures’ that populate flamenco is endless: Frijones, Marruro, Nitri, El Afarero, and Diego del Gastor. But among them, a place of honor is reserved for Loco Macandé (‘Crazy Macandé’). His name was originally Magandé (so close to the Arabic *mughanadun* for ‘singer’). He was a poor gypsy who lived the life of a nomad, wandering the streets selling sweets, which he announced with his own songs, where he masterly mixed different palos, rhythms, and modes. He attracted an entourage of admirers following him, but despite the admiration he aroused, he rejected attention and refused to perform for money or fame, preferring to sing for the prostitutes in the brothels. He was known for his neurotic oddities, demonstrated in his solitary habits, excessive concern with cleanliness, and eccentric generosity. As a child, he got into trouble running away, and we know from a newspaper of the time that he was apprehended and fined for throwing stones at a carter (Multas gubernativas, in ‘Gacetillas’, Crónica Meridional 2). He met tragedy after tragedy in his personal life—he had three children and all three were mute as his wife—never settling for long, and meddling with hashish in North Africa, before ending up in a mental institution back in Spain, where he died in 1947 (Cobo 57) (Barberán).

Interestingly for this study, Macandé has a parallel in the Medieval Arab world with Abu Abdallah al-Shudzi, also known as Sidi al-Halawī ‘the sweets vendor’ or ‘Mr. Candy’, a late judge (6th–early 7th H/late 12th–early 13th CE) who quit his honorable position in Seville for the life of an outcast or ‘holy fool’ in North Africa. After a transforming spiritual experience, he gave all he had to the disposed, left his family in Al-Andalus, and in 665 H/1266 CE, according to Yaḥya bn Khaldun (brother of the historian), became a ‘holy fool’ in Tlemcen. Just like Macandé seven centuries after him, he would wander the streets selling sweets to children and would sing and dance while they clapped their hands and snapped their fingers. It could almost be reimagined as a flamenco scene. Al-Halawī did not end his days in a mental asylum, but he was falsely accused of sorcery and beheaded, and his head was thrown to the dogs outside the city walls (Dermenghem 87–95).[[3]](#endnote-3) Today, a mosque in his name stands in Tlemcen, and though Macandé, as a flamenco artist, will never receive such honor, his songs survive as living testimonies of his art, learned in person and passed down by Ángel Álora, and performed by some of the greatest singers of flamenco, from Carmen Linares to Camarón de La Isla, and from Chano Lobato to El Álvarez.

**2.3.3. Insanity in Lyrics: Words of Madness and Wisdom**

Besides flamenco’s profuse offer of altered selves, its fascination with insanity transpires in a great deal of lyrics. It was embedded in literature during the Al-Andalus period, as a motif in love poetry that followed or derived from the Arab Udhrī genre, such as the *muwashshahat* by blind poet Al-A‘maa at-Tutili and the zajals of Ibn Quzman. Among the scores of flamenco lyrics that reference insanity, and leaving aside those where it is a mere intensifying rhetorical device, many bear the poignancy of real experience, for instance, telling of the suffering caused by the loss of the lover:

*Loco por el mundo ando, / se murió y desde aquel día, / loco por el mundo ando, / ya se acabó mi alegría, /y a Dios le pido llorando, /que termine con mi vía*. (I go through the world insane, / she died and from that day/ I go through the world insane. All my happiness is gone away / and to God, I only pray / with tears, my life to end). Flamenco palo: malagueñas.

*Como loco, yo a la calle me salí, / y a la gente que pasaba, / con que fatiga grande, / le preguntaba por ti.* (I ran into the street like a lunatic / and raging with terrible pain, / I was asking people that walked by / if anyone had seen any sign of you). Flamenco palo: bulerías.

In Arab poetry, as illustrated by Ibn Quzman’s zejels in his *Dīwān*, losing one’s mind for love is inextricably linked with insomniac nights, and so it is often in flamenco lyrics:

*De noche no duermo, / de día tampoco. / Sólo con pensar en la mía compañera / yo me vuelvo loco.* (I sleep neither by day nor by night. Thinking of my companion is driving me mad). Flamenco palo: seguiriya.

*Una noche tormentosa / quise dormir y no podía, / soñé que estabas con otro / y hasta la almohada dormía. / Los celos me vuelven loco. (*A stormy night, I tried to sleep, and it was in vain. I kept biting my pillow, because I dreamt you were with another. Jealousy is driving me insane). Flamenco palo: fandango.

Andalusi poetry was in many respects the natural child of Eastern Arabic culture and aesthetics, and Quzman was the heir of poets like late 2nd H/8th CE century Abu Nuwas from Baghdad, who wrote of love as ṭarab-like insanity:

The man burdened with passion is a weary man, /deep emotion [ṭarab] unsteadies him. (Arberry 46)

We come upon other shared motifs with Medieval Arab culture, such as the figures of the gossip and the slanderer, familiar to both readers of Ibn Hazm al-Qurtubī and assiduous listeners of flamenco, exemplified in the lyrics by El Chozas de Jerez in the palo of soleá:

*Por qué dice tu mujer / que yo he dormido contigo sin haber dormido? / O yo me estoy volviendo loco, / o tú has perdido el sentido”* (Why does your wife say I have slept with you? Either I am going mad, or it is you who has lost his mind).

One of the most thought-provoking motifs associated with madness in flamenco is that of ‘throwing stones’, a reminder of the incident perpetrated by Loco Macandé:

*Tiro piedras por la calle/ y al que le dé que perdone. / Tengo la cabeza loca / de tantas cavilaciones’.* (I go through the streets throwing stones. I have lost my mind from thinking so much). Flamenco palo: bulerías.

*Por lo que yo voy pasando, / yo no he tiradito piedras / poquito me va faltando.* (With what I am going through, I have not yet thrown stones, but I am close to doing it)*.* Flamenco palo: bulerías.

*Como desvarían los locos, /yo no he tiradito piedras, /pero me ha faltado muy poco.* (Like mad people rail, I have not yet thrown stones, but I am coming close to it).Flamenco palo: debla.

The rhizome of stone-throwing linked to madness has moved across cultures influenced by Arab poetry embedded in ghazals. F. W. Pritchett from Columbia University has pointed out how “in the ghazal world, boys mock and taunt madmen, and follow them around throwing stones at them” and quotes a ghazal by Urdu poet Mirza Asadullah Khan ‘Ghalib’ (1797–1869 CE), where the lover recovers his sanity by acknowledging Majnun’s madness as his own:

“In my boyhood (boyishness), Asad, I had once lifted a stone (to throw) at Majnooñ; But immediately, I remembered my own head.” (Ghalib 12)

In an interesting twist, one of the most popular lyrics has the sufferer identifying with a stone thrown after losing its balance, a rejection of society, while at the same time conveying a message of survival and resilience:

*Fui piedra y perdí mi centro, /y me arrojaron al mar, / a fuerza de mucho tiempo, mi centro vine a encontrar*. (I was a stone and lost my center / and I was thrown in the sea; / and after a long time / I found my balance again). Flamenco palo: soleá.

As in Arabic poetry, the blame is cast on love as a force able to unhinge the soundest and wisest minds, thus making insanity a wholly democratic ailment:

*De los sabios de este mundo, / aquel que supiere más, / mételo tú en un querer, / lo verás prevaricar.* (From all those wise men in the world, choose the one who knows the most, let him have experience in love, and you’ll have him lose his mind and curse his life). Flamenco palo: soleá.

*‘El querer quita el sentido; / lo digo por experiencia / porque a mí me ha sucedido’*. (Love deranges the mind. I talk from experience because that is what happened to me). Flamenco palo: soleá.

‘*Malhaya sea la persona / que a mí me ha enseñado a querer, / que yo estaba en mi sentido / y ahora me he quedado sin él’*. (I curse the person who taught me to love. I had my senses about me and now I have lost my wits). Flamenco palo: bulería.

We even find hints of the uncanny powers of the beloved being linked to their Moorish culture, revealing an undercurrent of fascination mingled with fear:

*Por más esfuerzos que hago / para ver si yo te olvido, /no puedo, porque me has dado / hierba mora con el vino*. (Hard as I try / to see if I can forget you. / I can’t, because you’ve given me / Moorish herb in the wine). Flamenco palo: unconfirmed, possibly soleá.

The detailed exploration of insanity in flamenco lyrics provides a multitude of angles, as in the sample shown below, where suffering unrequited love is deemed better for one’s mental health than attempting to forget the beloved: Flamenco palo: soleá.

*‘Una vez que intenté olvidarte / se me trastornó el sentido. / Volví de nuevo a quererte, / para recobrar lo perdido’*. (I once tried to forget you, / and that made me lose my senses. / So again I decided to love you, / so I could recover my mind). Flamenco palo: soleá.

Another dramatic image of mental disturbance, that of the soul—the seat of spiritual discernment and sound judgment—tearing from the body, appears in flamenco lyrics as well as in Arab poetry, offering an inverted image of the tearing of the robes from the body:

*Del sentío prevelico, / si en la calle yo te encuentro. / Movimiento jace el alma / pa esapartearse del cuerpo.* (I lose my mind if I meet you in the street. My soul moves to tear away from my body). Flamenco palo: bulerías.

In his *Ḥullat al-Siyarāt*, 3rd H/9th CE century, a poet from Córdoba, Sa’īd ibn Jūdī, expresses in similar terms his ardent love for a singer he has never seen:

*The sweet song that I have heard, tearing my soul from me, / has replaced it with a sadness that slowly consumes me. / It’s Jayḥan of whom I will keep eternal memory, / to whom I have given my heart although we have never seen each other.* (My translation from the French) (Dozy 228-229).

In every case, what defines these particular lyrics is the frankness and plain-spoken style with which they drive the message home. While translation does not do justice to the terseness and poignancy of expression, it is worth bearing in mind that their priority is to give a direct, emotional insight into the real-life experience, not to dazzle with the artifice of poetic craft. Flamenco lyrics range from the subtle to the blunt, and some songs will not shy from explicitly mentioning the ‘manicomio’ or psychiatric institution, sometimes confessing a personal experience:

*Contemplarme a mi madre de mi alma, que no llore más, / que loco muero, que muero loco, / enfermito en el hospital*. (Comfort my dear mother, don’t let her cry. / I have gone insane and in hospital will die). Flamenco palo: seguiriya.

*Yo muero loco, / loquito y rabiando en un hospital. / Que muero loco, loquito, / y yo muero en el hospital*. (Completely insane and railing. I am dying in a hospital, because I have gone mad). Flamenco palo: seguiriya.

Other times, they evoke traumatic events in someone else’s life, with the characteristic empathy so often present in flamenco lyrics. In the following example, the cameo scene of a depressive patient counting his fingers bears similarities with *Little Girl Blue* (Rodgers and Hart) performed by Nina Simone and Janis Joplin:

*A un manicomio yo entré, /yo vi a un loco que contaba con los dedos, /a un manicomio yo entré, /yo le dije que buscaba, y a mí se me volvió llorando, /por favor a mí me pedía, /que tranquilo yo lo dejara*. (I entered a madhouse and saw a man counting his fingers. I asked what he was doing, and he begged me to leave him alone). Flamenco palo: fandangos.

Characteristically, these flamenco lyrics are able to suggest whole tragic narratives with only a few sharply drawn details, broken fragments of a damaged reality, and it is not rare to encounter variants that offer differing nuances of similar circumstances:

*A mí me pesó haberlo hecho. / Yo entré en un manicomio un día, / y vi a una loca en el patio / que se reía y le daba el pecho / a una muñeca de trapo.* (I regretted having gone there. / I once visited a mental asylum / and saw a mad woman in the courtyard / laughing and offering her breast / to a doll made from rags). Flamenco palo: fandango.

*Lo besaba y lo mecía, / a un muñeco de cartón, /porque aquella loca creía, / que era el hijo de su corazón, Dios mío de mi alma, que a la cuna tiró un día.* (She was kissing and rocking a doll, because that mad woman believed it was the dear child of her heart that she once left in the orphanage). Flamenco palo: fandango.

Reflection is given to the complexities of human existence, leading to insights into the contradictions inherent to insanity:

*Qué cosa dice este loco, / que nunca dice verdades, /pero mentiras tampoco’*, (What on earth is this madman saying! He never tells the truth; still, neither does he tell lies). Flamenco palo: soleá

Derangement may even be deemed as a remedy to suffering, as in these lyrics, where insanity is, respectively, perceived as a state of blissful idiocy and as empowerment against opposers.

*Yo quisiera de momento, estar loco y no sentir, porque el sentir causa pena, tanta que no tiene fin, y el loco vive sin ella*, (I would rather, at this momento, go completely mad, / because feeling causes grief, and the mad live without it). Flamenco palo: bulerías.

*A mí me llamaban el loco, / porque siempre voy callado, / llamarme poquito a poco, / que soy un loco de cuidado.* (People call me crazy/ because I never say a word. / Watch what you say, /remember I’m railing mad). Flamenco palo: soleá.

**Conclusion**

Across Medieval Arab literary culture and flamenco are found intriguing motifs and thought-provoking coincidences related to insanity, which, in conjunction with other reoccurring elements from Arab culture in the milieu of flamenco, suggest a multiplanar network of connections and thus a continuation that resisted erasure under persecution. These cultural rhizomes open up to future explorations which would benefit from further research into Arab poetry and, particularly, lyrics from the Middle Ages in comparison with flamenco. The loss of the original context that gave these elements meaning and raison d'être poses a considerable challenge in identification and analysis and highlights the need to conduct investigations across diverse disciplines.

To close this one tentative and necessarily brief approximation, I return to the image of madness as a remedy or anesthetic for pain, as much as a self-destructive force, which we find in Majnun grabbing handfuls of hot coals and not letting go “until he fell unconscious and the coals fell with the flesh of his palms” (Al-Asfahanī 2: 25). And I pay homage to the memory of Abu l-Hasan ‘Ali Ibn Nafī’, Ziryāb, the musician and songster accused of madness in Baghdad, who settled in Córdoba in 207 H/822 CE, opening the way to Arab influence in Spanish music that would lead one day to flamenco.

1. The flamenco lyrics cited in this article are anonymous. A singer known to have made the lyrics popular may be cited along the lyrics. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Manuel Bohórquez Casado states that El Carbonerillo hit his former fiancé with the bottle when she approached him on the stage showing intentions to embrace him (Bohórquez Casado, El Carbonerillo 62). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. La folie, considérée souvent dans l’Islâm comme un signe de la présence de la divinité dans l’homme, plus d’une fois, l’origine de la réputation de sainteté de tel ou tel personnage, p.10.

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