THE JABEGOTE



Eco, memory and work in Malaga's rebalaje

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FOTO: Cristina Rodriguez Paz.

The song of the *jabegotes*, which the beach's inhabitants — *marengos* or *jabegotes* — used to perform in some of the tasks related to the *jábega* boat, boasts incalculable value. Here we aim to pay homage to its history and values.



Cante de jabegotes, with Miguel López Castro. Photo: Miguel López Castro Archive.

The *jabegote*: the roots of an indomitable, transgressive fandango

Malaga's coastline cannot be understood solely based on its geographical layout or urban development, its true essence lies in the profile of the traditional *jábega* fishing boats and in the echo of the men and women who for centuries made the sand their home, their livelihood and their social epicentre. It was along Malaga's coastline that one of the most unique and often most unknown jewels of the intangible heritage of our land appeared: the *cante de jabegotes*.

This song, which the beach's inhabitants, popularly known as *marengos* or *jabegotes*, sang while doing their daily tasks, boasts incalculable value. I will try to pay homage to its history and values, while also revealing the invisible thread that unites the iconic hundred-year-old wooden boat, the *María del Carmen*, with the brave and rasping voice of those who inhabited it.

From a technical and musicological point of view, the *jabegote* is a *fandango abandolao*. To understand its nature, we must look to the *verdial*, the oldest and most earthly reference in Malaga's folklore, from which almost all the fandangos in the province come.

As to its musical roots, in addition to the *verdial*, I have personally emphasised in many publications its often overlooked kinship with the *playera*. Traditionally, the historiography of flamenco has linked the *playera* almost exclusively with the configuration of the *seguiriya* based on a supposed semantic connection with the *ploranera*, due to its expressive nature endowed with deep-seated pain.

However, my thesis, reinforced by years of observation and study of the *marengo* environment, is that there were two different pathways for the *playera*: one that led to the tragic and almost liturgical depth of the flamenco *seguiriya* and another, brighter, more rhythmic current strictly linked to the coastal trade, which directly influenced the *cant de jabegotes*. After all, etymologically, *playera* comes directly from *playa*, the Spanish word for beach.

It is not an empty hypothesis; if we turn to the testimony of the Polish traveler Carlos Dembowski, who

visited our coasts between 1830 and 1840, we find fascinating stories. Dembowski describes scenes on the sands of Malaga where men and women sang improvised *playeras* songs accompanied by guitars and rhythmic hand clapping, dancing in pairs during summer nights. Those scenes were not *seguiriyas*; they were the living antecedent of what we know today as *jabegote*.

Even at the end of the 19th century we find evidence of this dual nature in the work *La playera, op. 737*, by Óscar de la Cinna. In this piece, included in the *Brisas de España* collection, the meter and the singing voice correspond to a primitive musical dialect from Malaga: octosyllabic quartets, far removed from the Castilian folkloric *seguidillas* that form the basis of the *seguiriyas*. This distinction is fundamental to return the *jabegote* to its place as a song with deep roots in Malaga and the sea, disassociating it from labels that don't suit it.

The survival of a style: from Niño de las Moras to the recording studio

Before the record industry officially labeled it as *jabegote*, this song was known simply and humbly as *cant de marengos* or fishermen's songs. The fact that it has survived to this day is due to people who acted as guardians of the oral tradition at a time when flamenco was beginning to become more professional and move away from its functional roots. The most essential figure in this process was, without a doubt, Juan Ternero, known artistically as the Niño de las Moras.

This *cantaor* (singer) was a legend from the El Palo neighbourhood, was the bridge between the virgin beach and the stages of the provincial capital. He not only preserved the style, but also gave it an artistic dignity that allowed it to be transmitted to the following generations of local *cantaores*.

Although it was recorded in 1953 under the name of *fandango nuevo* in the voice of Juan Varea, de las Moras's mastery allowed musicians from Malaga such as Antonio de Canillas and Cándido de Málaga to record it on vinyl. It was Cándido who, in 1963, on the iconic album *Sabor a Málaga*, recorded it for the first time under the name of *cante de jabegotes*, thus laying down its technical name for posterity.

The myth of singing while working: an ethnographic correction

Romantic literature and outside observers have often depicted fishermen singing while performing the hardest tasks of their trade. It has been said, almost poetically, that fishermen belted out the *jabegote* as they hauled the line to *jábega*'s fishing net, or as they rowed hard against the waves of a storm. However, the physical reality is that working at sea requires an enormous amount of effort and leaves little room for lyricism when pushing one's body to its limits.

I've pulled the *tralla* (a heavy rope net) many times as part of my research during my immersion into this culture. At this point, the body is completely given over to anaerobic exertion; you're out of breath, your lungs are burning and your heart is beating so hard that it is physically impossible to maintain the tuning, temper and control over your diaphragm that a quality *jabegote* requires. I have even conducted personal recorded experiments: trying to sing as I row a *jábega*. The result was that I had to stop rowing in order to be able to emit the three beats of the song while my companions continued with their work. Otherwise, the *jabegote* ended up unacceptable, choppy and lacking the necessary force.

So when was the song sung? The *jabegote* is a song of relaxation, of artisanal manual work, not one of great effort. It was mainly heard during the *sotarraje*, that leisurely and almost meditative time when the *marengos* and *marengas* sewed and mended the nets with their wooden needles while sitting on the sand in the shade of the beached boat. It was also sung in the voice of the *cenachero*, the public crier who, with his *cenachos* or

baskets loaded with freshly caught anchovies or sardines, walked the streets of Malaga. This task of walking rhythmically and calling out does allow the concentration necessary to execute the flourishes and power of the *jabegote*. Singing was the companion of artisanal work and sales, the relief from monotonous tasks, not the rhythm when the net had to be hauled in.

The *María del Carmen*: a century of history and social cohesion

If the song is the soul of this culture, the boat is its material body. The *María del Carmen* is now one hundred years old, a century of existence that makes it a living symbol and silent witness to the transformation of Malaga. To understand its importance, we have to go back to the 1930s. At that time, in the El Palo neighborhood alone there were around forty active *jábega* boats, each with its own name, its own history and its own personality.

María del Carmen went out to the ardá */ to fish for anchovies / and brought the nets full of* jabegotes *culture.*

Each boat was not just the private property of a skipper; it was a dynamic nucleus of economic and social life as well as relationships. Between nine and twelve families directly depended on each boat, which meant that an immense part of the neighbourhood was emotionally linked to the wooden boat. The bond between the *jabegotes* and their boat represented a loyalty that would be difficult for us to understand today. A neighbour's identity wasn't based on their surname, level of education or the street where they lived, but rather by membership in a specific crew. The usual question to place someone on the social map of the neighbourhood was: "*Hey you, what boat are you from?* ".

The boat was a company, a cooperative that offered survival and a social centre at the same time. There were rituals of cohesion that are fascinating to us today and that reinforce the idea of community, such as what was known as ***igualar la barca***. This ritual consisted of a barber going to the same sea shore, next to the boat heading out to sea, and giving all the crew members exactly the same haircut. Beyond aesthetics or hygiene, this act was a declaration of absolute equality and belonging to the group. Everyone was under the same skipper, everyone shared the same risk at sea, everyone was equal in the face of the fate.

Ethics and solidarity: the *garfa* and justice of the *rebalaje*

Life around the *jábega* was governed by unwritten laws based on a profound and vital sense of solidarity. In a context of extreme subsistence, sharing fish was not just a commercial transaction, but an act of communal social justice. One of the most beautiful and ethically powerful traditions was known as the *garfa*. It was a reward for solidarity: a portion of fish that the employer gave not only to the fishermen who had worked hard, but also to neighbours who helped occasionally, to the widows of the neighbourhood or to those who were simply in need and humbly asked for "the *garfa*".

I pulled the net in early / and they gave me my garfa */ my mother will be happy / today she has something to cook.*

This solidarity depended largely on the ethics and personality of the boat's skipper. In my own family, the memories of my grandfather, Luis, el Nueve Doble, are full of these stories of spontaneous generosity. The old women of the neighborhood still exclaim when they remember him: "*Your grandfather's boat saved all of us on Oliver street from hunger so many times!* " This same generosity was attributed to other legendary skippers whose names now grace the town streets or are local legends, such as Matías Rodríguez of *La Jopo*. They were figures who represented authority, but also protection for the community at a time when public social protection networks didn't exist.

The lexicon of the sea: guardian of words in danger of extinction

The *jabegote* has also acted, perhaps unconsciously, as an invaluable philological archive for our coast. Its lyrics have preserved technical terms and popular expressions that contemporary urbanites from Malage have almost completely forgotten.

A wonderful example of this popular poetry born from direct observation is the expression *te ríes más que la laja* (you laugh more than a *laja*). A *laja* is a reef or flat stone that protrudes slightly from the surface near the shore. When the sea is calm, but there's a slight movement of the bottom, the water constantly breaks over the stone and creates a white foam that looks like a smiling set of teeth that never dims. No sophisticated poet could ever hope to improve this observation of nature.

Similarly, the expression "*hacer la cala del hueso*" (to make a notch in the bone) has been immortalised in song. It refers to someone who shirks their responsibility, who disappears when the time comes for hard work or, what's much worse according to the *marenga* ethic, when it comes time to settle debts or pay wages.

When it was time to pay / hiciste la cala el hueso / I'm not going to worry / I'll see you later in the boat.

Preservation and future projects

Challenges and initiatives to ensure the legacy remains alive today

Today the song is saved from oblivion or invisibility due to a lack of clear identification as a flamenco style, at least in Malaga, where it is recognised as one of the oldest *fandangos abandolaos* and as one of those that require the most strength and soul when performing it.

In recent years, interest in singing has grown in Malaga and, following the publication of the biography of Niño de las Moras (Miguel López and Manuel Ternero, 1997), a good number of lyrics or improvised songs of *jabegotes* have been created that capture the richness of the culture of Malaga's fishermen. A booklet has even been published, which has already had three editions, dedicated exclusively to *jabegotes* lyrics (Pepe Espejo, 2002). Also noteworthy are the songs by Marivi Verdú, Carmen Aguirre, Luis Utrera Madroñero and other Malaga lyricists, along with the compositions that schoolchildren created for the 1st National *Jabegotes* Lyrics Competition for Schoolchildren, organised by the El Palo Residents' Association. Singing *jabegotes* has also formed part of the school curriculum in Malaga, with the creation of specific teaching materials for schools.

In terms of celebrations, the song has also been recovered and included in various events. One of the activities in which it has had a presence in recent years has been the sea baptisms. Another exciting initiative that uses the *canto de jabegotes* to give a special shine to the event is the celebration of the summer solstice, on 21 June.

Such a generous solstice / with the magic of poems / music from the seashells / jabegote songs / rowing against the waves.

Another activity featuring *jabegotes* is the commemoration of the sinking of the *C3*, a submarine of the Spanish Republic. Likewise, several associations that commemorate the tragic events of the *Desbandá*, a massacre committed in Malaga and Almeria during the Spanish Civil War, published an album with poems dedicated to this episode. Flamenco was not missing in this work, and I myself recorded a piece performing *jabegotes*.

Death snaked its way / On the road to Almería / And the strong rising water / A rain of bullets hit us / Spat out by the boats Desbandá.



The author, hauling in the line. Photo: Miguel López Castro Collection.



As soon as the line of the fishing net is hauled in, amidst the cloud of scales left by the fish, it is time to get the *garfa*. Photo: Miguel López Castro Archive.

The echo that endures on the shores of the 21st century

Keeping the *jabegote* alive, explaining its lyrics to young people, protecting wooden boats like the *María del Carmen* and honouring the history of the *marengos* of El Palo and Pedregalejo ensure that the echo of our identity is not extinguished in the *rebalaje* of history.

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