

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN THE SEPHARDIC TREATMENT OF THE *ROMANCERO*

The *romancero*, so much a part of Spanish culture, was equally important among the Spanish Jews, a significant component of the cultural patrimony which accompanied them in their exile from Spain in 1492¹. These ballads thus became an element of Sephardic culture in all areas of the diaspora. The Sephardic communities established after the exile are classified geographically: the Eastern, or Levantine communities are in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Egypt and Israel, whereas Algeria, Tangier and Morocco are the areas of the Western communities².

Medieval works long gone in Spain have been preserved in the Sephardic diaspora. The relatively recent discovery of a body of *romances* current among the Moroccan Sephardim has brought to light the existence of some medieval ballads not extant elsewhere³. This fact should not be surprising, since Spanish ballads represent the past, the apex of Mediterranean Jewish culture, the very roots of the present-day communities, be they in North Africa, Israel, or the New World. Like the keys to family homes in Toledo, Granada, Seville, these *romances* are an affirmation of community identity, of the glorious past in which their ancestors participated. They were considered a symbol of Spanish origin and, consequently, a certain air of nobility was connected to their conservation. Knowledge of these *romances* was a mark of distinction⁴.

But not all Sephardic *romances* date from the pre-expulsion years. Some were brought to the diaspora in succeeding centuries by converts who still lived in Spain, many of whom left the mother country to resume or—in many cases—to establish a Jewish life for themselves. Other ballads came through peripatetic contacts with Jewish businessmen visiting Spain, Spanish travelers who found themselves among Spanish-speaking exiles, or the arrival of Cryptojews from Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries⁵. Still more recent *romances* came through established political contact with Spain, especially in North Africa. Paul Bénichou notes that the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492 preserved both the Spanish language and the *romancero* tradition in the Balkans, the Near East and Morocco⁶. But preferred themes are not the same in Span-

1. Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman, «Christian Elements and De-Christianization in the Sephardic *Romancero*», *Collected Studies in Honour of Américo Castro's Eightieth Year*, ed. M. P. Hornik (Oxford, 1965), 38.

2. Judith Etzion and Susana Weich-Shahak, «The Spanish and the Sephardic Romances: Musical Links», *Ethnomusicology*, 32 #2 (Spring/Summer 1988), 1-37. See p. 1, n. 2.

3. See Paul Bénichou, *Romancero judeo-español de Marruecos* (Madrid: Ed. Castalia, 1968).

4. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

5. Jacob M. Hassán, «Visión panorámica de la literatura sefardí», *Hispania Judaica II: Literatura*, ed. Joseph M. Sola Solé et al. (Barcelona: Puvill Libros, [1984]), 25-44. See p. 43.

6. *Romancero judeo-español de Marruecos*, 9, 10, 282-283.

ish and Sephardic ballads, for «Spanish balladry prefers heroic or chivalric themes, which are often endowed with a highly sentimental flavor, whereas Sephardic balladry tends to focus on personal relationships, whether in the family, between lovers, or in the courtly "household"»⁷.

An integral component of Spanish culture, the *romance* could not help but reflect the religion which was a predominant aspect of Spanish culture. That religion, Catholicism, became increasingly antithetical to the Jews in Spain, dating from its establishment as the state religion in the seventh century. The desire to unite the entire Visigothic realm under the Church led to laws which prohibited Jews from hiring Christians to work their fields, and from occupying public office. King Sisebut even went so far as to promulgate a law which required Jews to either convert to Christianity or abandon his kingdom⁸. That was, perhaps, the first low point in Jewish-Christian relations on the Iberian Peninsula. Although Jewish culture subsequently reached its Golden Age there, the coexistence of the two religious groups was never totally comfortable. There was cooperation in the famous School of Translators in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which included many Jewish intellectuals who, with Alfonso X's emphasis on Castilian, became truly decisive factors in the development of that language. But while Alfonso's *Siete partidas* legislated respect for synagogues as «houses in which God's name is praised», the thirteenth century also saw laws against mixed marriages. And although forced baptism was prohibited, conversion to Judaism brought with it the death penalty⁹.

Religious disputes throughout the Iberian Peninsula became common in the thirteenth century, and by the end of that century anti-Jewish feelings were rampant among Spanish Christians. Popular condemnation of the Jews exploded in a series of uprisings throughout the Iberian Peninsula in 1391 –uprisings which can truly be called pogroms—resulting in a profound change in Jewish demography. The Jewish population was reduced to approximately one-third of what it had been, another third having died or left Spain during the uprisings, and the final third having undergone conversion to Christianity –not all of them willingly¹⁰.

Prosperous and prestigious Jewish communities, such as those in Barcelona and Burgos ceased to exist¹¹. Jews no longer concentrated in the large cities, but rather they dispersed to small towns. To quote Paloma Díaz Mas, «Spanish Jewry had received a mortal blow»¹². The century between the 1391 pogroms and the expulsion edict of 1492 marks the nadir of Jewish history in Spain.

Yet Catholicism, so fundamental to the majority identity of Spaniards and so inimical to Spanish Jews, necessarily had its reflections in the *romance*. Happenings were dated according to Christian holidays, such as the *mañana de San Juan, día de Pascua florida*,

7. Etzion, 3.

8. Paloma Díaz Mas, *Los sefardíes: historia, lengua y cultura* (Barcelona: Riopiedras Ediciones, 1986), 18.

9. Díaz Mas, 20-21.

10. Haim Beinart, «The Converso Community in 15th-Century Spain», *The Sephardi Heritage*, ed. R.D. Barnett (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1971), 425-456. See p. 425.

11. Yitzhak Baer, *Historia de los judíos en la España cristiana*, tr. José Luis Lacave (Madrid: Altolena Editores, 1981), II, 504.

12. Paloma Díaz Mas, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

those ballads dealing with interactions with the Moors identified the Spaniards as *cristianos*, and priests, friars and nuns were characters in the stories told in some of the ballads. How were the Spanish Jews to handle these phenomena while retaining those ballads? Dechristianization of Spanish *romances* among the Sephardim, then, should come as no surprise.

One might well expect a complete and deliberate process of dechristianization to have taken place among the Sephardim of the post-1492 diaspora, but such is not the case. In both the Eastern and Western traditions, there is an erosion or substitution of those terms which would suppose an adherence to Christian practices and beliefs¹³. Other references, mere objective allusions to Christian objects and customs, on the other hand, were generally retained¹⁴. The dechristianization might better be thought of as an accommodation of the *romance* to Sephardic culture¹⁵.

Armistead and Silverman's study of this process points out various treatments of Christian elements in the *romances* preserved by the Sephardim:

- 1) conservation, without change, of the Christian element;
- 2) conservation of the Christian element, but with loss of meaning;
- 3) replacement of a Spanish-Christian form by its Greek or Turkish equivalent (among the Eastern Sephardim);
- 4) replacement of the Christian element by a neutral, secular term;
- 5) replacement of the Christian element by a meaningless form;
- 6) replacement of the Christian element by a specifically Jewish term; or
- 7) omission of the Christian element¹⁶.

Most common is the preservation of Christian elements, apparently due to «their use in narrative *topoi* and formulistic diction», at least in part, but «historical factors and cultural values must also have played a decisive rôle»¹⁷. The more recent *romances* within the Sephardic repertoire seem to show the greatest amount of conservation of these elements¹⁸. These Christian features, «in various degrees of conservation, absorption, or disguise, are discernible throughout the Sephardic *Romancero*»¹⁹.

The second most frequent phenomenon in the Sephardic *romancero* is the substitution of neutral, secular terms for Christian elements. This course of action may be explained by «cultural and religious isolation and a consequent loss of familiarity with the concepts involved», rather than by deliberate efforts to dechristianize the *romances*.²⁰

Deliberate dechristianization likely results in most of the cases of secular or specifically Jewish substitutions for Christian elements, but the replacement «by specifically

13. Hassán, 43.

14. Bénichou, 288.

15. Manuel Alvar, *Poesía tradicional de los judíos españoles* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1971), xvii.

16. Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman, «Christian Elements and De-Christianization in the Sephardic *Romancero*», 21-38. See pp. 28, 32.

17. *Ibid.*, 34.

18. *Ibid.*, 31.

19. *Ibid.*, 27.

20. *Ibid.*, 30, 33.

Jewish terminology occurs very infrequently», according to Armistead and Silverman²¹. They, in fact, suggest a possibility which has no necessary relationship with the Sephardim *per se*:

Christian elements present in the Moroccan versions of a given ballad are often found to be lacking in its Eastern counterpart; but they may also be absent in certain geographic variants from the Peninsular tradition as well. The obvious and often unanswerable question that arises is whether or not the Eastern Sephardim actually took with them into exile a variant containing Christian elements²².

Whatever the cause, there are Sephardic versions of *romances* which differ, by the elimination of Christian references, from Peninsular versions of the same ballads. As an example of two procedures in the dechristianization of one stanza of a ballad, below are the lyrics from the version of «Don Bueso y su hermana» sung on the album *Raíces*,²³ a Sephardic collection, with a contrasting version of one stanza as discovered in Barcelona:

Una tarde de verano

(Don Bueso y la hermana
cautiva)

Una tarde de verano
pasí por la morería
y vi una mora lavando
al pie de una fuente fría.

Yo la dije mora linda,
yo la dije mora bella,
deja beber mis caballos
esas aguas cristalinas.

–No soy mora, el caballero
que soy de España nacida
que me cautivaron moros
días de pascua florida.

–Si quieres venir conmigo
a España te llevaría.

–Y la ropa, el caballero,
¿dónde yo la dejaría?

–Lo que es de seda y grana
en mis caballos se iría,
y lo que no sirva nada

No soy mora, caballero,
que soy cristiana cautiva,
me cautivaron los moros
*noche de Pascua Florida*²⁴.

21. *Ibid.*, 30, 33.

22. *Ibid.*, 30.

23. *Raíces: Cantos Tradicionales Judeo-Españoles*, REDIM RD7022.

24. Daniel Sherr, «Seis romances judeo-españoles de Barcelona», *La Corónica*, XII, #2 (Spring 1984), 211-218. See p. 213.

por el río tornaría.
 Al llegar an ca sus padres
 la niña llora y suspira.
 –¿Por qué lloras, niña linda?
 ¿Por qué lloras, bella niña?
 –Lloro porque en estos campos
 mi padre a cazar venía
 con mi hermanito Alejandro
 y toda su compañía.
 –¡Abrid puertas y ventanas,
 balcones y galerías,
 que por traer una esposa,
 os traigo a una hermana mía!

We can see what has happened to the Christian references; in the recorded version, the character is no longer identified as a Christian, but rather as having been born in Spain. The Christian reference has been replaced by one which is secular, geographic. The second reference, which is just a calendar marker, has become judaized: *noche de Pascua Florida*, the night of Easter Sunday, is now *días de pascua florida*, referring to the Jewish Passover, an eight-day observance.

Because of their social prestige and their nostalgic value, connecting contemporary Sephardim with the cultural and historic eminence of their pre-expulsion ancestors, Spanish *romances* have remained an integral component of Sephardic culture. But, like many folkloric elements, they have been adapted to the reality in which they continue to exist.

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