

*“De tu boca a los cielos:”*¹

Jewish women’s songs in Northern Morocco As Oracles of Communal Holiness

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Aunt and niece of the Busbib family in Ksar el Kebir in the 1940s, dressed in the Berberisca dress, symbol of fertility, holiness and the unification of opposites. Collection of Alegria Busbib de Bengio

This study focuses on the intrinsic relationship between Jewish women’s songs in Haketía, Moroccan Judeo-Spanish and the internal communal structuring relating to tribal family lineages in Morocco’s Sephardic community. This chapter will demonstrate how

¹ From your mouth to the heavens, Proverb in Haketía, Moroccan Judeo-Spanish

women's songs and their messages serve as active nuclei in the dynamic of preservation, transmission and survival of Jewish communities in Morocco.



An all women's gathering to celebrate a bride in 1960s Larache. The women would sing for the bride, towards her fertility, happiness and moral standing. Collection of Alegria Busbib de Bengio.

The survival of physical and spiritual lineages are ensured by protecting the group's *tahara*, ritual purity. Only through the preservation of *tahara* can holiness be ensured for the next generations. In Morocco, the community's holiness as a whole depends in great measure on women's

physical and spiritual behavior. This has been ensured for generations by various mechanisms of control regarding women's sexuality. The concept of women's responsibility for holiness and the consequences for not adhering to these principles permeate through the narratives of *romances*, wedding songs and newly composed satirical *coplas*.

This article links these women's songs in the vernacular to Talmudic teachings, which stress the primordial concern of Jewish communities throughout the world: maintaining the community's spiritual lineage intact while living as a cultural and religious minority.

Bellida, Bellida what are your traditions?

Those salty crackers and couscous

And now with Pepe, pig lard.

Pepe, Pepe, Pe, Pepe buy me a candle

If I have a boy we'll call him Nisim [miracles].

Pepe, Pepe, Pe, Pepe buy me a crib

If I have a girl we'll call her Luna [moon],

None should be left behind...

Bellida, Bellida got into the bed

Because of her desire of Pepe, the baby doesn't suckle.

And the little cat came and broke the grinder

Cursed are you Bellida, you and your first born.²

Alegria Bengio, originally from Ksar El Kebir sang this song in Haketía laughing at the end during the metaphoric sexual implication of the text of Bellida and Pepe's sexual moment. The community's disapproval at Bellida's having transgressed the community's boundaries which is stated at the beginning of the song in regards to losing her 'adas, traditions [esas tortas yevdas y ese cuscusu] and adopting Pepe's pig lard

²Alegria Bengio, Interview, summer 2010, Casablanca. The original reads as:

“Bellida, Bellida cuáles son tus ‘adas
esas tortas yevdas y ese cuscusu:
Y auera con Pepe, manteca de haluf.
Pepe, Pepe, Pe, Pepe mercame un candil
si tuviereniño le nombrareNisim.
Pepe, Pepe, Pe, Pepe mercame una cuna
si tuviera niña la nombraremos Luna,
no quede ninguna...
Bellida, Bellida se subió a la cama
de ansia de Pepe el niño no la mama.
Y vino el gatito y quebró el molinito
negra estás Bellida tu y tu bejorito.”

[manteca de haluf] becomes a curse by the end of the song. She and her first born are cursed: *negra estés Bellida tu y tu bejorito*. *Behor* is the Hebrew word for the first born male who is the recipient of extra spiritual blessing and inheritance rights. Thirty days after the birth of a *behor*, a first born male, a ritual with the *Cohanim*, the descendants of the Temple's priests, ensures that the parents can keep their first born child and do not have to hand him over to the priestly class to engage in spiritual work. This ritual persists until today, even though the Temple in Jerusalem has not been functioning since the year 70 C.E. after its destruction by the Romans.

Since Bellida's transgressive relationship with Pepe took her out of her community's relationship with ritual and Jewish spiritual transmission, both she and her child are cursed at the end of the song. Alegria's singing of this copla in haketía was very matter of fact, with no specific emotional judgement attached to it, except for her embarrassment to the reference to sex at the end. On the other hand, Julia B., from Tangier explained the core message of this copla:

*Bellida, Bellida you married Pepe and that's why it says what were your traditions, he is lard... because Bellida was Jewish and she married Pepe, a Catholic: before they were... that's why you yourself have to understand the meaning, before it was your couscous and now with Pepe, pig lard.*³

Late one week-day afternoon in April 2015 three older women from northern Morocco (Tangier, Tetuan and Ksar el Kebir) gathered for tea in Casablanca, where they

³ Julia B., Interview, June 1, 2011, Paris. The original reads as: "*Bellida bellida que te casaste con Pepe y por eso decía cuáles son tus Hadas el manteca, porque es que Bellida era judía y se casó con Pepe católico y dice: Antes eran... por eso te lo tienes que entender, antes era tu Cuscús y ahora con Pepe manteca de Haluf.*"

have lived for over fifty years. At the beginning of the gathering the hostess came downstairs with a stapled 35-page printed document of the family's genealogy. They were discussing the possibility of their families being related through a common ancestor. In the following conversation, one can observe that the lady whose family is from Tangier reiterates twice that she is the descendant of a Toledano woman. At the beginning she states: "I'm a descendant of Meriem Toledano" - later in the conversation she repeats the statement including the Bengio side saying: "We all come from a Mrs. Toledano." The final statement by Esther, from Tetuan was "once you start going backwards in the lineages, we are all family!"

The conversation that afternoon was as follows:

S: I'm a descendant of Meriem Toledano

B: When the grandfather died, there was him and his son, the father and the son died from the plague and this was when Rabbi Itzhak Bengualid named Rabbi Mordecai Bengio as Great Rabbi of Tangier.

S: Ah, ok, but Bengualid was in Tetuan.

B: In Tetuan, he was the Great Rabbi of the whole Spanish zone.

S: Bengio, Yehoshua, Bengio David, Bengio Hola... Ben, Bendelac Mordechai, is he your family too?

B: maybe, he probably is... but my husband... he is a descendant of Rabbi Mordechai's brother.

S: Do you have Bensadons [in your lineage?]

B: The wife of Raphael Bendrihem was a Bensadon, but maybe.

S: what was her name?

B: Alegria, Alegria Bensadon, from Tetuan.

S: Bengio Estrella... and there are Salama here too

B: Estrella Bengio also married her cousin Bengio.

B: Abraham Bengio is my husband's great-grandfather.

S: Abraham Bengio. The first Bengio that is named is Bengio Moshe.

B: Moshe is the first patriarch. He and his son both died the same year after the plague.

S: He was Merima Bengio's son, probably Meriam.

B: She must have also been married to a Bengio?

S: No! it was... she married a Toledano.

B: Someone did the Bengio genealogy and went all the way back to 1790.

S: We all come from a Mrs. Toledano

B: the Toledanos, those who came from Spain.

S: yes from Spain and from Meknes! They probably went through Meknes before arriving to Tangier.

B: exactly, but they all came from Spain.

S: Of course! of course! I met a Bengio in Jerusalem and he told me that I am in his family tree. So, it's possible that I'm related to your husband as well.

B: Of course! Because the Bengio core, my husband's great-grandfather is here.

Abraham Bengio is Mordechai Bengio's brother.

S: Bengio Mordechai is here.

B: He had a brother Monsef who died in 1917. At the Alliance they sang the Psalms and they blew the shofar. I have books that talk about that.

E: once you start going backwards in the lineages, we are all family, look your grandmother, your great-grandmother!⁴

By the end of the afternoon all three women were comfortable to have confirmed the tight-knit communal bonds that bound them together as family even without their explicit previous knowledge of the exact familial relationship.⁵

⁴*S: moi je suis descendant de Meriem Toledano*

B :quand le grand père est mort, il y a lui et son fils, le père et le fils sont mort avec la peste, et c'est dans ce moment la que Rbi Isak Bengualid a nommé Rebi Mordecai Bengio Grand Rabbin de Tanger.

S: ah d'accord, mais Bengualid il était à Tétouan.

B: à Tétouan c'était le grand Rabbin de toute la zone espagnol.

S: Bengio Yehoshua, Bengio David, Bengio Hola... Ben, Bendelac Mordechai il est parent a vous aussi?

B: peut être, il doit être dans la... mais mon mari ...descend du frère de Rebbi Mordechai.

S: Vous avais des Bensadon?

B: Bensadon c'est la femme de Rafael Bendrihem, mais, peut être.

S: et quelle est son prénom?

B: Alegria, Alegria Bensadon, de Tétouan.

S: Bengio Estrella... il y a les Salama aussi...

B: Estrella Bengio a épousé son cousin Bengio aussi.

B: Abraham Bengio c'est l'arrière grand-père de mon mari.

S: Abraham Bengio. Le premiere Bengio qui est cité c'est Bengio Moche.

B: Moshe es el primer patriarca. Lui et son fils sont morts tout les deux dans la même année a la suite de la peste.

S: et c'était les fils de Merima Bengio, c'est a dire Meriam probablement.

B: que devait être marié a un Bengio aussi!

S: Non! c'était... elle a épousé un Toledano.

B: il y a quelqu'un que a fait la généalogie Bengio ils sont arrivée a 1790.

S: On est tous issu d'une Toledano.

B: les Toledano ce qui sont venu d'Espagne.

S: il venait d'Espagne et de Meknes! Il sont peut être passé a Meknes avant de venir a Tanger.

B: exactement, mais ils sont tous d'Espagne.

S: Bien sur! Bien sur! Et il y a un Bengio que j'ai rencontré à Jerusalem que m'a dit vous figure dans mon arbre généalogique. Alors il y a des chances que ça soit un parent a votre mari alors.

B: biensur! Parce que si vous voulais, le noyau Bengio, l'arrière grand-père de mon mari il est la. Abraham Bengio, c'est le frère de Rebbi Mordechai.

S: Bengio Mordechai il est la

B: Il avais un frère Monsef il est mort en 1917. D'Ailleurs dans Alliance ils nous ont chanté le Tehelim et ils ont sonné le shofar. Moi j'ai des livres ou on raconte tout ça.

E: Por algún sitio todos salimos familia, cuando se pone uno a buscar, mira tu abuela, tu tatarabuela!

⁵Interview/conversation between Alegria B., Marcelle S. and Esther L. April 15, 2015, Casablanca.

In the mid-twentieth century the Jewish community in northern Morocco was facing extreme pressures between modernity and the upholding of tradition. Public shaming became one of the manners in which the Rabbinic authorities responded. This example from 1960s Tetuan dramatically demonstrates how traditional societal boundaries started to present fissures. The Hahám responded trying to instill fear of shame by installing drastic measures, which would bring shame upon the girl and the whole family.

“Bibas, the Sage of Tetuan. Yes Bibas. He was very stern, Bibas was something else. Why was he so stern? I’ll tell you why... because there were many Spaniards and the Spaniards had a very good situation and the Jewish girls were very beautiful, so they would go off with the Spaniards. And Bibas did not permit that. Do you know what he did? He would shave her head and would walk her through the whole neighborhood so nobody else would do that. He shaved her head, yes, they would take her and shave all her hair off and they would take his helpers and they would parade her through the whole neighborhood so that when another girl wanted to go with a Spaniard she couldn’t...”⁶

A woman’s transgression of sexual boundaries brought *herem*, communal excommunication, upon her. This applied either to her losing her virginity before marriage and being discovered or to her adulterous behavior within marriage. When a

⁶ Sara Azagury, Interview October 27, 2011, Casablanca. The original reads as:
SA – *Bibas el Hahám de Tetuán. Si, Bibás. Era muy difícil, Bibas era algo increíble. ¿Porqué difícil?, pues te voy a decir porqué...porque había muchos españoles y los españoles también estaban muy bien, y las hebreas eran muy guapas, y se iban con los españoles. Y Bibas no lo permitía. ¿Sabes lo que hacía? La pelaba rape, y la paseaba por toooodo el barrio para que no volviera otra a hacerlo. La pelaba, si, se la llevaban y la pelaban rape, y cogía la ordenanza la paseaban por todo el barrio, así cuando otra quisiera ir con otro español, no pudiera ir...*

woman was *jarmeada* or *jarmá*, *haketía* for excommunicated/shamed communally, she was considered lost. If she was an adulterous woman with children, she would immediately lose any custody and the terms of her *ketubá*, marriage legal document, were null and void. Donna Elbaz recounts how she heard about this in her childhood in Tangier in the 1940s.

“Jarmá means that she wasn’t a virgin, as if she were lost forever. The Spanish word is lost, but in Arabic [sic], just for us [the Jews], our law says jarmá [Haketía coming from the Hebrew word herem, excommunicated]... like when a woman is married and she goes off with another man, it’s called jarmá because she did it out in the street [outside of the private family space].”⁷

The primacy of tribal lines

The Jewish community of northern Morocco is particularly focused on extended family units. People trace their ancestral lines to demonstrate the importance of their ancestors and their lineage, which gives them importance. If an ancestor was important, it enhances the importance of all members of the family. These larger tribal groups, traced through family names and imparting a collective familial identity are of primordial importance in Morocco’s Jewish community.

The survival of these tribal family lines, these Judeo-Hispano-Moroccan dynasties are at the core of what drives the continuity of their cultural production. It is through

⁷ Donna Elbaz, Interview, april 7 2008, Tangier. The original reads as: Jarmá quiere decir que no era mocita, quiere decir como que estaba perdida. La palabra en español será perdida, pero en árabe, nada más en nosotros, la ley nuestra se dice Jarmá... como una mujer cuando está casada y se va con otro, se llama Jarmá porque ya hizo fuera en la calle también.

songs, food, traditional dress and rituals that these traditions of our people (*de los nuestros*) are perpetuated. This study proves that the key structure of the survival of lineages is through the preservation of identity thanks to the physical and spiritual purity of Sephardic Jewish women in Morocco. This identity and lineages are preserved in great part thanks to the sexual boundaries placed around young women of childbearing age. Many of these boundaries are reiterated on a daily basis through songs sung by women for a mostly feminine audience. The songs and their message are at the core of the dynamic of the physical preservation of the Judeo-Hispano-Moroccan community.

Repertoire collected and thematic axes

Since 2007 I have been interviewing and recording men and women from northern Morocco's Jewish community on songs of the ancient women (*los cantares de las antiguas*). I have recorded repertoire and interviewed eighty-nine people ranging from the age of 22 to 99 about the repertoire they sing, sang or heard sung and their memories and emotions surrounding the songs and their narratives.

Oral traditions are used as a manner of encoded language to transmit messages that are of fundamental value to the culture, but that are not always to be spoken of openly. Songs of adultery, incest and infanticide form part of the repertoire alongside celebrations of fertility, songs about a mother-in-law's tests of faithfulness for a young bride or the transgression of social hierarchical barriers. One of my male informants stated that how "[he] believe[s] the older women sang what they would not say in speech."⁸

⁸Interview, Maurice H., July 16, 2012, Paris.

And another, when I asked him if his mother in early 20th century Tangier would sing songs for “secular pleasure,” in other words, Spanish songs that had no Jewish content, answered:

*Absolutely not, everything my mother did was intrinsically related to Judaism. She was a very pious woman and all her actions related to her Jewishness. I know that for her these songs were all Jewish songs and were a part of her own Jewishness.*⁹

These testimonies reiterate that using the communal voice of song, women passed encoded messages, which they themselves considered to be intrinsically Jewish to the younger generation. They considered the repertoire they sang as a Jewish repertoire even though the texts referred to non-Jewish characters. All the songs are in Moroccan Judeo-Spanish, Haketía which is the language of the private sphere, and the one which transmits deep communal concerns, identity and humor.¹⁰ Although they were transmitting core communal values the topics were sensitive enough to not be discussed openly at all times in conversation, thus the critical nature of daily and ritual communal singing.

The use of women’s oral traditions as a mechanism for identity protection and communal continuity is found throughout the Maghreb in both Jewish and Muslim communities. Similarly to the use of oral literature in other Maghrebi societies, songs in Haketia have the clear social function to maintain a permanent state of protection against the threat of internal splintering or external subversion. Haketia-speaking Moroccan Jews

⁹ Henri B., Interview, December 12, 2012, New York.

¹⁰ For a more in depth discussion on the importance of Haketia and the communities linguistic example of intertwined identities see Vanessa Paloma Elbaz, “Judeo-Spanish in Morocco: language, identity, separation or integration?” in *La Bienvenue et l’adieu: Migrants juifs et musulmans au Maghreb (XVe au XXe siècle)*, ed. Frederique Abecassis, Karima Dirèche et Rita Aouad, vol I, 103-112. (Casablanca: La Croisée des chemins, 2012).

which are perceived by many,¹¹ as being more Spanish than Moroccan actually act with Maghrebi moeurs. It is their use of strict tribal communal mechanisms that protect the integrity of their community's filiation. Camille Lacoste-Dujardin has described Kabyle society and their rigorous patrilinearity, which excludes women from filiation, but which needs them as procreators of boys. They were forced to maintain a strict communal cohesion through stringent rules of behavior, particularly a severe control of women by men. The fertility which women control is the key to the reproduction of males and guarantees the strength of the patrilineal family, creating anxiety about guaranteeing the desired result.¹² Sephardim in northern Morocco function with the same anxieties and rigorous patrilinearity.

In total, I collected 125 songs forming part of the repertoire sung by the Jews in northern Morocco. The three pillars of Judeo-Spanish repertoire that come through the interviews are *Romances* (narrative songs), *Cantares* for the life cycle (Wedding songs, songs for birth and circumcision) and Liturgical and Para-liturgical songs (songs for the synagogue and holidays). I have divided the different repertoire according to large thematic concerns within its texts and function.

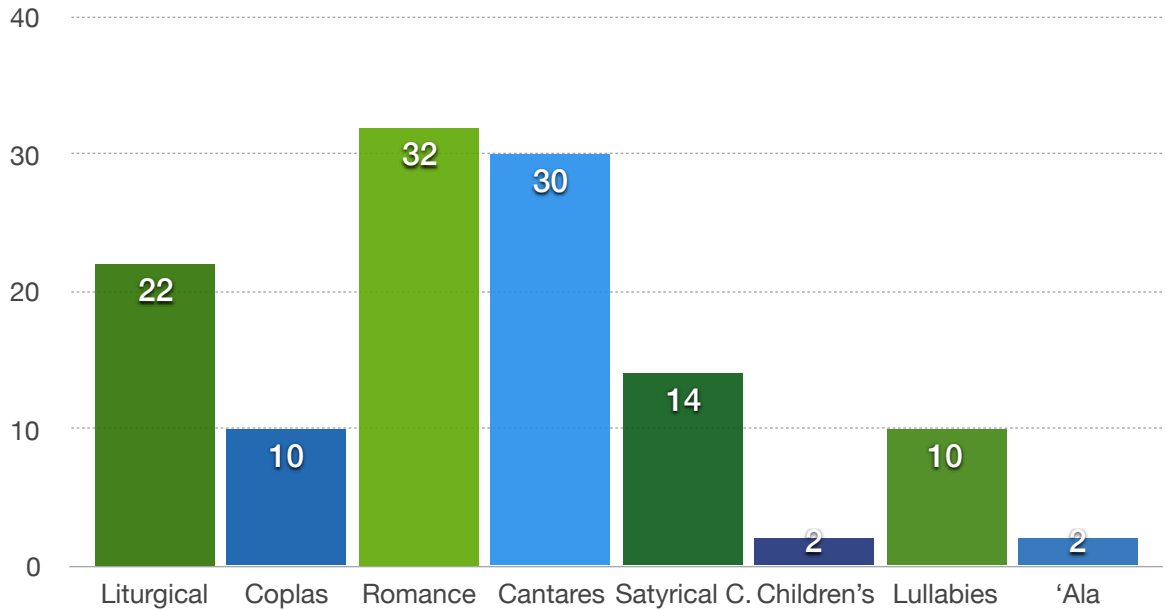
The large thematic axes that appear are:

1. ROMANCES: Group boundaries, which is subdivided in sexual boundaries, internal group boundaries and external group boundaries.
2. CANTARES FOR THE LIFE CYCLE: Fertility
3. LITURGICAL and PARA-LITURGICAL COPLAS: Sanctification

¹¹ "Yo soy Española, no Marroquí" Hilda P., June 2008, Tangier; "Les vrais juifs marocains c'est les juifs que parle l'arabe marocain, pas l'espagnol, ça c'est des Rumis" R.S., Casablanca, October, 2011.

¹² Camille Lacoste-Dujardin, *Contes des femmes et d'ogresses en Kabylie*, (Paris: Karthala, 2010), 187-188

Table A

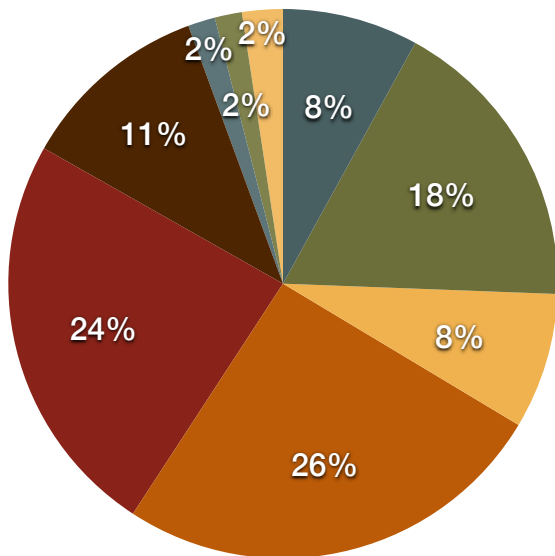


Fifty one percent of the songs collected during these nine years are Romances and songs for the life cycle, in other words, they are songs that focus on themes of group boundaries (romances) and fertility (songs for the life cycle).

The three pillars of Judeo-Spanish musical repertoire in Morocco are:

Romances 26%
Cantares for Life cycle 24%
Liturgical songs + Para-liturgical coplas 26%

- *Within 125 songs, 51% of the repertoire is divided between Romances and Cantares for the Life cycle.*
- *The rest of the repertoire is divided amongst satyirical coplas, lullabies, 2 Andalusian songs ('Ala) et 2 children's songs as well as three miscellaneous foreign songs.*



- Lullabies
- Liturgical
- Coplas
- Romance
- Cantares
- Satyirical C.
- Children's
- 'Ala
- Misc.

Table B

Sub-categories for textual themes

The following list includes all the Romances, Cantares for the life cycle and Liturgical and Para-Liturgical repertoire in their thematic categories according to the material collected through my interviews. This list is demonstrative of the surviving song tradition in Morocco today, both as active songs still sung by a portion of the population today and in the memory of Sephardic Moroccans as songs they interacted with through their family's singing. It is clear just by looking at it that the largest number of repertoire deals with group boundaries.

Within the theme of group boundaries, the largest number of *Romances* deals with issues of sexual boundaries. The explicitness of these numbers points to the fact that maintaining strict sexual boundaries remains an important theme within Moroccan Judaism, in order to preserve the integrity of the group and its spiritual purity. The heaviest presence of this thematic axe confirms that these songs are used to reiterate communal morality and impart lessons to the younger generation.

Below are examples of the songs that relate to each of these thematic axes:

Group boundaries *sexual boundaries*

Adultery (Rosablanca, Este servillano, Hasiba y Nisim)

Avoided adultery (Rahel Lastimoza,)

Faithful wife (Escuchís señor soldado)

Incest (Amnon y Tamar, La Delgada)

Test of faithfulness by mother-in-law (Minueragarrida)

Group celebrations (El Pajaro en el Nido, Barujjubaru, Demandado de los sabios)

internal group boundaries

Transgression of social hierarchies (Gerineldo, Preso llevan a Bergico)

Love contrary to parent's wishes (Diego León, Que se pensaba la Reina)

Infanticide and cannibalism (Estábase sentada la niña)

external group boundaries

Kidnapping and reintegration to group of origin (La Reina Xerifa Mora, Una Tarde de Verano)

Transgressions because of bad influences (Bellida Bellida, Cuando todos los Christianos)

Fertility

Beauty of the bride (Arrelumbre, Fuerame a Bañar, Dice la nuestra novia, AsperaSeñor)

Celebration of the bed (Ay Esterica, Esta noche la mi madre, Despedida de la novia, Bellida Bellida)

Aphrodisiac meal (Dai de senar)

Virility and pregnancy (Biba Ordueña, Paipero, Holita, La que paría los hijos)

Virginity/Bride's Purity (Ansi se m'arrimó, Dainos a la novia)

Sanctification **Praises to God** (Dayenou, Empezar quero cantar, El Hai Sur
'Olamim)

Thanks to God (Vivas tu y viva yo, Buena Semana, Hi Torálanu
nitana)

Sanctification of women (Romance de Sol, La Doncella Guerrera,
Una Hija tiene el Rey)

The Gravity of Adultery

Women's adultery poses a serious threat to a system based on patriarchal lineage and family names. When a woman crosses that threshold she shatters the boundaries around her nuclear family unit and the place that unit has within the larger patrilineal structure. In the Sephardic community, as in other tribal based groups, the uncontrolled female body is dangerous. A woman's faithfulness towards her husband could become a communal issue as in the case of a couple in Tangier in the 1960s. One shabbat morning, a group of Jews in Tangier in 2008 were still discussing this case:

Do you remember R. who had her lover in the store across the street from her house? And when the store's window was closed everyone knew that the owner of the store was across the street with F.'s wife. Until one day the Rabbis called F. to tell him he had to divorce his wife because the whole community was talking and her infidelity could cause curses for the whole community. F. loved his wife and must have had some arrangement because he told the Rabbis to not get involved in his life and that he did not want to divorce his wife. And everyone continued

*gossiping about her and her lover. But the Rabbis were extremely worried that it would bring upon curses.*¹³

This case of flagrant adultery in the public eye which was not sanctioned caused such an uproar that sixty years later the remaining Jews in Tangier were still discussing it on occasion. The woman's complete openness with the community and her husband's flagrant denial to follow the Rabbinical injunction demonstrate how tradition and modernity clashed.

Cynthia Becker's observations on the Moroccan Amazigh Ait Khabbash world apply measure for measure to the Jewish community's behavior. This is yet another example of Judeo-Hispano-Moroccans acting with the same manners as non-Jewish Moroccans:

All links to the external non-Ait Khabbash world must be contained and maintained or the group will dissolve; the opened, uncontrolled female body is thereby seen as dangerous to the integrity of the society, simultaneously putting women in both a precarious and powerful position.¹⁴

If there is a child born from her infidelity, there is a complete rupture in the system that the community is built on. In Jewish law these children carry a heavy burden as they are

¹³Field notes, CK, AA, EA, RP, February 9, 2008, Tangier.

¿Y se acuerdan de R. que tenía a su querido en la tienda del frente de su casa?y cuando la tienda cerraba la ventana, todo el mundo sabía que el de la tienda estaba con la mujer de F., en la casa del frente. Hasta que un día los Rabinos llamaron a F. para decirle que tenía que divorciarse de su mujer, porque toda la comunidad estaba hablando y que eso podría traer maldiciones sobre la comunidad entera. F. quería a su mujer y debían tener algún arreglo, porque el les dijo que no se metieran en su vida y que el no se quería divorciar de su mujer. Y todo el mundo seguía hablando de ella y su querido. Pero los rabinos estaban muy preocupados que eso podría traer grandes calamidades sobre los judíos.

¹⁴ Cynthia Becker, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 145.

pariahs (*mamzerim*) in the community and can not marry whomever they choose, they can only marry another child of adultery, a convert or a maidservant. The critical balance of the community's continuity as a minority with strong patrilineal subgroups which can ally through marriage depends on the rigid upkeep of these strict behavioral norms. As Valerie Moghadam writes, "when women are defined as reproducers of a collective group, this often leads to the control of their reproduction and sexuality in the interests of maintaining boundaries between their group and others."¹⁵ Adultery is the complete breach of internal patrilineal boundaries. If the adultery is with someone from outside the Jewish community then there is a double breach, both patrilineal and communal.

Moroccan Jewesses in opposition: Hasiba and Sol as opposing figures

Two Moroccan songs about two events that occurred to emblematic women in northern Morocco in the last two hundred years carry the particularity of having been written to commemorate troublesome events that perturbed the community and that served as examples for other women. The purpose of the constant repetition of these two women's behavior is to bring these events to contemporary ears in order to teach the listeners what to emulate and to avoid. They are opposite in their themes: *Hasiba y Nisim* is a satirical copla on a scandalous love affair between a married Jewish woman from Tangier and a French Jewish military man which ended in catastrophe for *Hasiba*, the woman; she was repudiated and lost custody of her children to their father, who remarried, while she was exiled to Tetuan and saw her children only occasionally. This was the price that was exacted for her crossing over the boundaries of the group. Contrarily *El Romance de Sol*

¹⁵Valerie Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 19.

tells the story of the young virgin martyr who remained within the group boundaries, and paid with her very life for this faithfulness. Sol was from Tangier and was executed in 1834 for refusing to accept in a court of law that she had converted to Islam. She denied having converted, but two Muslim witnesses testified that she had converted, creating a legal conundrum. She was tried not as a Jew, but as a *ridda*, an apostate. The earliest recorded version of her *Romance* is from the 1920s, possibly placing its composition in the late nineteenth century. Her story represents the ultimate purity a Jewish Moroccan woman can be expected to uphold within

community standards and is still celebrated as such. She remained true to her faith and placed the interest of the group over her own, paying with her life. This has made her a celebrated saint throughout the Jewish Moroccan world.

This photograph illustrates the symbolic function that *Solika* fulfills, her photo has been placed in place of the head of the bride on a public display of the *Berberisca* dress, the traditional gold velvet embroidered dress that

brides wear during the night of the henna

celebration, the day where she transitions into womanhood and is a symbol of communal purity and fertility. This placement of Solika's image as Jewish Moroccan bride implies



Berberisca dress with Soulika as the bride's head. Collection Soly Anidjar

that she represents the ultimate symbol of beauty, purity and *tahara* that any bride should emulate. Her song, finishes with the words:

las doncellas que cobren valor...para no verse como Sol se vio.

Y si alguna se ve en igual caso sepa portarse con igual valor.¹⁶

Young women should take valor [in her example]... to not find themselves in her situation

and if any one finds herself in this situation she should behave with as much bravery [as she].

El Romance de Sol narrates how the young Sol preferred death over conversion to Islam. She had been accused of apostasy, a crime punishable by death. It was a very popular Romance which was taught at the schools of the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*¹⁷ in Larache and that young girls would sing in the streets as they were walking in the *judería*, the Jewish quarter. For others it was a romance of the private sphere:

My mother always sang El Romance de Sol, and I liked it a lot. It always made me cry, but I always asked her to sing it for me.¹⁸

In some families it was a traditional song with a cyclical ritual nature: every year during a certain holiday meal they knew they would listen to the Rabbi's wife singing this *Romance*:

¹⁶Interview, Vivian G., December 12, 2007, Tangier.

¹⁷Interview, Vivian G., December 5, 2008, Tangier.

¹⁸Momi A., private conversation, March 11, 2014, Paris.

*I remember they always came to eat to our house on the second day of Passover and after the meal, Simi, Rebbi Yamín's wife would sing El Romance de Solika after eating. And for me then it was horrible, it was so boring, horrible. But now I realize that it is these childhood memories that are the deepest memories we have, you see? And that really impacted me. It was beautiful, beautiful and her voice too...*¹⁹

El Romance de Sol is one of the clearest examples in the repertoire of how these *cantares de las judías antiguas* are conceived of internally by those who sing them. Mesood Salama considers them as feminine religious music, with the same sacred status as a hebrew liturgical poem, a *piyyut* sung in the synagogue.²⁰ The narratives are opportunities to transmit messages to younger women of child-bearing age on proper behavior. In Solika's case, the text ends on an explicit exhortation to follow her example.

*Y si alguna se ve en igual caso sepa portarse con igual valor.
and if any one finds herself in this situation she should behave with as much
bravery [as she].*

In Tangier around a shabbat table at a lull in conversation a man breaks out in song:

*Por estos boulevares de siete a ocho,
ahi van las al'hazbas buscando novio.*

¹⁹ Rachel Muyal, phone conversation, December 29, 2013.

²⁰ "The singing and communal performance of such *romances*, together with their association with a ritual and a melody which was perceived as religious music, gave these particular ballads a sacred dimension... in some ways these *romances* are the feminine counterpart of the *piyyutim* sung by men in the synagogue and during public religious festivals." Mesood Salama, "Judeo-Spanish Romancero as a Source of Women's Spirituality." *Languages and Literatures of Sephardic and Oriental Jews*, ed. David Bunis (Jerusalem: Misgave Yerushalayim, 2009), 373-374.

Me vaya capará, me vaya jalalá,

*Hasiba y Nisim se fueron a fugrear.*²¹

Peals of laughter ensue while a man and a woman, both in the seventies explain to me that this is a song about an event that happened in Tangier and that shook the community to its core.²² Today the line that is sung the most is the refrain, which functions as a punchline: *Hasiba y Nisim se fueron a fugrear*. The singers explain the obscenity of their behavior, delineated by a word in haketia: *fugrear*. This word comes from the word in darija that signifies the kneading movement that is done to the couscous while it is cooking in vapor.²³

Lineage and Tahara

Strict sexual morality is inextricably linked to ritual purity (*tahara*) a physical purity that allows metaphysical purity to exist in the physical world. Cohanim (plural for Cohen) are the guardians of ritual purity for the Jewish people and their lineage is the most guarded within Judaism, to ensure that the original spiritual line from Aaron, the high priest is not broken. Only in this way Cohanim will continue to inherit the spiritual strength of their ancestors and impart the priestly blessing to the rest of the Jews.

In a parallel manner, the Moroccan Sephardi Jewish community protects its lineage to ensure the continuity of their ancestor's spiritual line to their descendants. This is closely guarded and reiterated by family names and family trees which can be long lists

²¹ On these boulevards, from seven to eight, the young girls were walking looking for a boyfriend. May I be protected, may I be lala. Hasiba and Nisim went to caress each other.

²² CK, EA. Fieldnotes, January 2008.

²³ Interview, Chemaya K., September 19, 2009, Tangier.

within *ketubot*, marriage contracts. The importance of the mother's spiritual and physical ascendance is imparted to her children for up to ten generations. This explains the reiterating concern that the ancient songs (*los cantares antiguos*) have with insisting on strict sexual mores, because it is the mother that carries the child and before DNA tests it was only through her fidelity that paternity was ascertained.

In Talmud Kiddushin,²⁴ the tractate delineating the laws concerning Jewish marriage, there is a section which explains the prohibition around who can marry into the priesthood, which women may marry Cohanim. The strict view is that the daughter of converts may not marry a Cohen for ten generations: "But [with regard to] a male proselyte who married a female proselyte—his daughter is disqualified [from marrying into] the priesthood. [This is true] both for proselytes and for freed slaves, even for ten generations, until one's mother is a [naturally-born] Jew." Even many generations later, the children remain connected to their ancestral root and this was seen as a potential liability when marrying into the priesthood.

Lineage and the power it wields in northern Morocco's Jewish community demonstrates the manner in which individuals are transformed into subjects of the larger

²⁴Mishnah Kiddushin Chapter 4:

http://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Kiddushin.4.8?lang=en&layout=lines&sidebarLang=all accessed June 3, 2016 5:20pm

The daughter of a chalal is disqualified to [marry into] the priesthood forever. [With regard to] an Israelite who married a chalalah, his daughter is valid. [With regard to] a chalal who married the daughter of an Israelite, his daughter is disqualified to [marry into] the priesthood. Rabbi Yehuda says, "The daughter of a male convert is like the daughter of a chalal.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov says, "[With regard to] an Israelite who married a female proselyte, his daughter is fit to [marry into] the priesthood. And [with regard to] a male proselyte who married the daughter of an Israelite, his daughter is fit to [marry into] the priesthood. *But [with regard to] a male proselyte who married a female proselyte— his daughter is disqualified [from marrying into] the priesthood. [This is true] both for proselytes and for freed slaves, even for ten generations, until one's mother is a [naturally-born] Jew.*" Rabbi Yossi says, "Even [with regard to] a male proselyte who married a female proselyte, his daughter is fit to [marry into] the priesthood.

extended family. This form of subjugating power is described by Michel Foucault as a law of truth imposed on the individual.²⁵ Both men and women are made into subjects that must perpetuate this system of identity building through tribal and family lines. Their own identity, individual, but ultimately collective, must further the goals of the group - often costing individuals their personal dreams and aspirations if they fall outside of the community's mold. Moroccan Jewish mothers considered mixed marriages (marrying a non-Jew) as a curse from God and the "complete negation of their existence."²⁶ Marrying outside of the Jewish community constituted an irreparable breach that was to be avoided at all costs. It is not within the scope of this chapter to address the concern with mixed marriages, but one dramatic example of its ever-present nature in the Jewish community is its repeated appearance as the central theme in novels written between 1930 and 2015 with Jews from northern Morocco as their central characters.²⁷

Carrying the torch of holiness

One of the ultimate goals for families within Jewish Morocco is to perpetuate their familial lines and to have a large and spiritually influential lineage. Just as having an ancestor that was not desirable affects a lineage, the opposite is also the case. The

²⁵Foucault, Michel, "The Subject and Power" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 8 No.4, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 781.

"This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subjects."

²⁶Arlette Toledano, *Juives et Juifs dans le Maroc contemporain: Image d'un avenir*, (Paris: Geuthner, 2002), 161.

²⁷ Novels on the oscillation between personal freedom and the imperatives of an unbroken traditional continuity appear in multiple writers' works throughout the last ninety years from Blanche Bendahan's *Mazaltob* (1930) to Ralph Toledano's *Revoir Tanger* (2015).

following examples demonstrate how the descendants of a Jewish holy man (*tsaddik*) are considered to be the emissaries of the holiness (in Hebrew *kedusha*) of their ancestor. The descendants of the respected Rabbi Yitzhak Bengualid, the *tsaddik* from Tetuan come annually for the celebration of his *hilloula*,²⁸ the pilgrimage to his tomb on the anniversary of his death the week preceding the holiday of Purim.²⁹ His descendants come from Madrid, New York and Israel, and they are the VIPs of the three day celebration. They embody the holiness of Rabbi Bengualid and are given special honors such as lighting the first candle the night of the *hilloula* celebration. The representatives of the Bengualid family line (there are two lines, from two different wives, the first having passed away) are considered to be almost holy themselves, because they carry the *kedusha* of the Tsaddik in themselves. Notwithstanding the fact that some of the younger ones have not even studied the teachings of their ancestor, they are the physical manifestation of Rabbi Bengualid today. All the pilgrims express their respect to Rabbi Bengualid by respecting his descendants.

Living in London is one of the descendants of the family of Sol Hachuel, Soulika, the young girl from Tangier who stood fast in her Jewish faith even in the face of death, and who was decapitated in 1834 for apostasy after a controversial trial in Fez. Ruth F., who is from the Gibraltar branch of the Hatchwell family, stores a family tree next to

²⁸ In Morocco there is an active and ancient tradition of pilgrimages to saint's tombs (both Muslim and Jewish). Each city has at least one major Tsaddik, and in some cases a Tsaddika (a woman saint). These saints were generally traveling Rabbis who came from the Holy Land or communal leaders who were very pious and respected. To pray at their tomb (*zorear al tsaddik*), to light candles or give a meal (*seudá*) in their honor is a way to invite blessing and health.

²⁹ Rabbi Bengualid passed away at the end of the 19th century, but the commemoration of his death still actively celebrated as an important date. He was a revered Rabbi and judge, and the only one who approved the arrival of the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools to an extremely traditional Tetuan, bringing secular schooling to Jewish boys and girls in the 1860s.

Soulika's painting, which hangs in the living room/dining room area just under her own ketubah (wedding contract) and by her own wedding photos and the photos of her son. The imagery in her living room focuses on a public display of her marriage contract, which she pointed out is in the particular style of Gibraltar, Soulika's photo and the photos of her husband and her son, the fruit of their marriage. Her arrangement of this iconography establishes that she has a kosher union, that her lineage is connected to a holy woman and that her child stems from this long tradition.

In her family tree she traces her own family to Gibraltar and before that to Tangier and Tetuan, where the Hachuel family originates. Her towering childhood memory from her aunt's home in Gibraltar, where she spent her summers as a child, was the oil painting of Soulika in the dining room and the stories her aunts told her about how she stood fast in her faith, a daily reminder of the importance of her sacrifice and the honor she brought to the family into the future for her attachment to her religious and physical purity.³⁰

For families who cannot claim a saint in their lineage, tracking and relating their ancestral names remains part of the common conversation particularly when meeting with people from their geographical region. Stating who they are in relationship to the other person's family and possibly finding a common ancestor begins many conversations as a manner to establish kinship and points of adherence to larger communal familial structures.

Contrarily to urban families in Europe and the Americas, the Moroccan traditional extended family continues functioning as such to this day and rests at the heart of Jewish

³⁰ Ruth F., Interview, March 13, 2013, London.

social life. Unlike many other contemporary urban Jewish communities, it is not the synagogue that stands at the center of Jewish life in Morocco. In contemporary Moroccan Jewish life the center of Jewish life remains the home and the family. Guarding the family and its integrity is paramount. This falls squarely on the shoulders of the women of the family and their commitment to moral and religious precepts. The phenomenon observed by Paula Hyman in middle-class nineteenth century western Jewish households regarding the importance of Jewish women in maintaining Judaism in the domestic spaces demonstrates that:

This ideology called upon women to create a peaceful domestic environment free from the stresses of the larger society and devoted to the preservation and transmission of traditional morality, while men assumed the burden of earning a living and governing society. Religion fell naturally within women's domain, for it drew upon emotion to disseminate morality and fortify social order.³¹

Thus the home, under women's aegis has continued serving Jewish communities that face assimilation as a center of moral and religious transmission even when synagogue participation is down, as in the case that Hyman described in bourgeois European nineteenth century Jewish families. By contrast, in Morocco the Jewish majority is not assimilated. Even the least religious of Jews is observant of a minimum of Jewish practice and most are generally traditional in religious matters. This differs from European Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but notwithstanding, one sees

³¹ Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 25.

that the Jewish home has played a pivotal role in the preservation and transmission of traditional morality in transnational contexts.

As mentioned previously, the creation and maintenance of life in a *tahor*, pure, manner, within the laws of Judaism, is largely under women's control (cooking kosher, preparing shabbat and the holidays and keeping the laws of family purity). These are called *las cosas de las señoras*, in northern Morocco. Women create the physical container for spirituality because the home is considered as the recipient of the divine presence, like a womb.

Transforming women's sexuality into purity and fertility

The *cantares de las judías antiguas* served as a ritual declaration in a prescribed communal voice. During wedding celebrations women's singing provides a ritualistic transformative function for the bride, who is undergoing the life transition from girl to woman. The coplas which celebrate her beauty and exhort her to fertility accompany her during what was traditionally a weeklong celebration. Contemporary practice has diminished to four days (Thursday Berberisca/Henna, Friday and Saturday Shabbat night and day and Sunday Ketuba/Huppa). The



Singing Cantares de la novia (Songs for the bride) in the mikve during a wedding celebration. Collection Fanny Oaknine

continued public role of women's singing during these celebrations demonstrate the public association of women with fertility and reproduction, giving them considerable

power and prestige.³² Contrary to the *Romances* which are sung in quotidian contexts and focus on guarding the boundaries of the group, celebratory wedding *coplas* focus on the positive and public aspects of sexuality.

During a women's wedding her contained sexuality becomes an asset and not a threat because of the imminent transformation of her sexuality into fertility. As Rahel Wasserfall's analysis on Moroccan immigrants of Sefrou to Israel concludes:

In this process of transforming sexuality into fertility, purity has a central role, as it transforms fertility into Jewish fertility. This transformation takes place through... the acceptance of Jewish law, and the bride's promise to visit the *mikveh* and thereby actualize both the bridegroom's and her own fertility.³³

Thus, the songs sung by older women to the young bride during the mikveh celebration, the Berberisca, the shabbat and the wedding, reiterating the bride's purity, beauty and her fertility serve as oracles for her future holiness as the carrier of *tahara* for future generations. The *cantares antiguos* impregnate the body of the bride, and exhort her to embody the powerful symbol of holiness that will guarantee the community's survival.

*"I'm going towards the bed
to see if the pillows are wool
and to see if the bride is a virgin..."*

Then she answers:

"my mother only put mother of pearl cream on me

³² Becker, 2006: 161.

³³Rahel Wasserfall, "Community, Fertility, and Sexuality: Identity Formation among Moroccan Jewish Immigrants," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed., R. Wasserfall, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 196.

my mother only put mother of pearl cream on me

the bride's face is like a shining diamond

the bride's face is like a shining diamond."³⁴

The bride, symbol of purity and radiance, is likened to a mother of pearl or a radiant diamond. She was sung to during the wedding ritual of transition between her life as a girl and as a wife and mother. Her *tahara* and the community's vocal celebration of it helped to maintain the desired unbroken chain of lineage between ancestral Jews and contemporary Jewish life. It is thus that the songs continue serving until today in their function of oracles of feminine holiness. They promote and celebrate women's role in the continuity of the Moroccan Haketia speaking Jewish community.

³⁴ Mercedes Bengio, Interview, May 18, 2014, Ouezzane.

"Voy hacia la cama

por ver si la almohada era de lana

y por ver a la nuestra novia si era galana..."

entonces le contesta:

"no me puso mi madre más que albayalde,

no me puso mi madre más que albayalde,

lacara de la novia como el diamante

lacara de la novia como el diamante."

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Abstract

This article focuses on the intrinsic relationship between Jewish women's songs in Haketía, Moroccan Judeo-spanish and the internal communal structuring relating to tribal family lineages in Morocco's Sephardic community. It demonstrates how women's songs and their messages serve as active nuclei in the dynamic of preservation, transmission and survival of Jewish communities in Morocco. The article also highlights and analyzes the links between women's songs in the vernacular and Talmudic teachings which stress the primordial concern of Jewish communities throughout the world: maintaining the community's spiritual lineage intact while living as a cultural and religious minority. Finally the author underlines the fact that songs were largely used to shape and control women's sexuality.

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