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Language, Religion and Difference: North African and Turkish Jewish Identity Formation Vis-À-Vis Ashkenazim in Canada

Abstract

This article examines Sephardic identity formation in the North American context through Sephardic Jews' encounter with their co-religionists, Ashkenazi Jews. It explores the shifting cultural, linguistic and traditional boundaries between Ashkenazi Jews and North African and Turkish Jews in Montreal and Toronto to understand the North American dynamics of this inter-ethnic encounter. Given that they are a minority in relation to Yiddish and English-speaking Ashkenazim who started to settle in Canada in the 19th century, how then did the relationship between Sephardim and Ashkenazim develop and what specific role did language play in shaping this inter-ethnic encounter in North America? After a historical overview of encounters between these two groups in North America, drawing on twenty life-story interviews with Moroccan, Tunisian, and Turkish Jews, this article presents an empirical portrait of these relationships in contemporary Canada from a relational sociology perspective. Providing an historical contextualization from a selective literature on the Jewish migration from Ottoman lands, the Middle East and North Africa to North America helps formulate the question of how this encounter relates to the current context in Canada. By paying specific attention to both the continuities and the ruptures in the relations between Sephardic and Ashkenazic groups in North America since the 1910s, this article argues that the encounter between these two groups in Montreal and Toronto shows how the linguistic pluralism in Quebec, which is different from the United States and Toronto, illuminates a unique context. As such, the collective experiences of North African and Turkish Jews I interviewed in this study reveals Canadian pluralism through the interplay between language, ethnicity, and religion.

Résumé

Cet article examine la formation de l'identité sépharade dans le contexte nord-américain à travers la rencontre des Juifs sépharades avec leurs coreligionnaires, les Juifs ashkénazes. Il explore les frontières culturelles, linguistiques et traditionnelles changeantes entre les juifs ashkénazes et les juifs nord-africains et turcs à Montréal et à Toronto pour comprendre la dynamique nord-américaine de cette rencontre interethnique. Étant donné qu'ils constituent une minorité par rapport aux ashkénazes parlant yiddish et anglais qui ont commencé à s'installer au Canada au XIXe siècle, comment la relation entre sépharades et ashkénazes s'est-elle développée et quel rôle spécifique la langue a-t-elle joué dans le façonnement de cette rencontre interethnique en Amérique du Nord ? Après un survol historique des rencontres entre ces deux groupes en Amérique du Nord, s'appuyant sur vingt entretiens de récits de vie avec des Juifs marocains, tunisiens et turcs, cet article présente un portrait empirique de ces relations dans le Canada contemporain dans une perspective de sociologie relationnelle. La mise en contexte historique, à partir d'une littérature sélective sur

la migration juive des terres ottomanes, du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord vers l'Amérique du Nord, permet de formuler la question de savoir comment cette rencontre s'inscrit dans le contexte actuel du Canada. En accordant une attention particulière aux continuités et aux ruptures dans les relations entre les groupes sépharades et ashkénazes en Amérique du Nord depuis les années 1910, cet article soutient que la rencontre entre ces deux groupes à Montréal et à Toronto montre comment le pluralisme linguistique du Québec, différent de celui des États-Unis et de Toronto, éclaire un contexte unique. À ce titre, les expériences collectives des Juifs nord-africains et turcs que j'ai interviewés dans le cadre de cette étude révèlent le pluralisme canadien à travers l'interaction entre la langue, l'ethnicité et la religion.

Historicizing the Encounter

The first Sephardic migration to Canada dates back to the 18th century. In contrast to Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern, Western and Central Europe, Sephardic Jews form a small minority of the Jewish population in Anglo Canada.[1] For example, some 22,225 Sephardic Jews live in Quebec, comprising 24.5% of the 90,780 Jews living in the province.[2] Following the Inquisitions in the Iberian Peninsula, a growing number of Castilian Jews, namely "Western" or "Old" Sephardim, immigrated to England and the Netherlands. A number of these exiles left Britain, and eventually settled in Montreal in 1760. Many of these British families of Sephardic origin who were affiliated with the Shearith Israel of London founded the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of Montreal, the first Jewish synagogue in Canada, in 1768.[3] By contrast, Jews who went in exile to the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and the Middle East rather than the Netherlands and England in the 15th century are called "Eastern" Sephardim. The post-expelled Eastern Sephardim who relocated to various places such as North Africa began to live with native, non-Sephardic or "indigenous" Jews. In Morocco, they were designated *Toshavim* (dwellers) and were treated as different from the post-expelled Castilian Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, who were rather labelled as *Megurashim* (expelled ones), in Tunisia, they were called *Twansa* (Jews from Tunis) and distinguished themselves from *Grana* (post-expelled Jews who came to Tunis from Livorno).[4] Following the decolonization in North Africa, there was a substantial wave of Sephardic emigration to Canada, especially to Quebec.[5] The majority of this immigration to Canada from North Africa as well as from Turkey took place during the 1950s and 1970s. Whereas francophone North African Jews chose to immigrate to Montreal, most of the hispanophone Jews from northern Morocco and Turkey settled in Toronto.[6] In the early 20th century, on the other hand, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War, territorial disintegration coupled with the Balkan wars, and a series of natural disasters led to a major Sephardic exodus from the Ottoman Empire and its subsequent nations to the United States.[7] Given that North African and Turkish Jews were a minority in relation to Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim who started to settle in North America in the 19th century, how then

did the relationship between them develop and what specific role did language play in shaping this inter-ethnic encounter?

In their work, *In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People,* Gary A. Tobin, Scott Rubin and Dianne Tobin use the term "benign ignorance" to refer to individuals who believe that there are neither racially nor ethnically diverse Jews.[8] The passing of the 1924 Immigration Act, in the wake of the Balkan Wars and the First World War, a time when—mostly Ottoman-Sephardic Jews had been immigrating to the United States, led to what historian Aviva Ben-Ur identifies as "a denial of shared ethnicity and religion (whereby Ashkenazim failed to recognize Sephardim as fellow Jews)."[9] When Jews emigrated to the United States from the Ottoman cities, including Salonica, Izmir (Smyrna), Istanbul (Constantinople), Tekirdag and Edirne with other Sephardim from North Africa, Iraq, or Egypt—who had their own specific cultural denominators—they constituted the periphery of the Western Sephardim in America. This was also the case for North African Jews who immigrated to Canada. Nearly fifteen thousand French-speaking Jews settled in Montreal following Morocco's independence. Indeed, Canadian Ashkenazi Jewish organizations lobbied the Canadian government to permit North African Jewish immigration to the country.[10] In addition to originating from different regions, these groups' cultural and vernacular linguistic characteristics (Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Spanish and French) made them distinctive and "marked them in the minds of Ashkenazic leaders more as gentiles than as Jews" especially upon arrival to North America.[11] Despite the shared experience of collective movement, Ottoman Jews who settled in the U.S. after the First World War did not experience similar trajectories to the North African Jews who settled in Canada in the latter half of the 20th century. Linguistic factors figured prominently in their decision on whether to immigrate to Canada or the United States. Whereas Ladino-speaking Ottoman Jews immigrated to the United States before the establishment of modern Turkish state, hispanophone northern Moroccan and Ladino-speaking Turkish Jews settled in English-speaking Toronto. The majority of the francophone North African Jews, on the other hand, chose Montreal as their destination.

Joseph M. Papo noticed that during the early 20th century "the mode of life of the Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire was so alien to the Ashkenazim that they had the difficulty of accepting them as Jews."[12] New York's Lower East Side "was home to one of the largest populations of Ottoman-born Jews in the world" and Ashkenazi residents went so far as to have "petitioned the Mayor to remove the 'Turks in our midst' because of the disturbances they were creating. When the residents learned that the 'Turks' were in reality Sephardi Jews, they withdrew the petition."[13] Moishe Gadol, an Ottoman Jew from Bulgaria who edited the first Ladino newspaper, a periodical called *La America* published between 1910 and 1925, expressed discontent with interactions he witnessed between Jews from the Ottoman Empire and es-

tablished, German and Polish Jews.[14] He wrote that unemployment was widespread among Ottoman Jews and that they were not believed to be Jews by "mainstream" Jews except with many attempts and explanations.[15] Historian Ben—Ur documents an insult in the journal *El Progreso* in 1915, a socialist—oriented Ladino press published in the United States.[16] The notification was in a column entitled "Palavras de Mujer" written by Moise B. Soulam, a Jew from Salonica.[17] The column details an interesting conversation taking place in the Lower East Side between an Ashkenazi tradesman and a Sephardic woman. The column reports that when the Sephardic woman began bargaining, it so irritated the Ashkenazi merchant that he called her a "Jerusalem Jew." Soulam further states that "the Ashkenazim take all of us Turkinos for Jews who came from Jerusalem, and I swear to you that now, when they see a woman or man bargaining a lot, they call them Jerusalem Jew, and they think they're insulting us."[18] In the *La Bos de Pueblo* journal, on the other hand, Ben–Ur identifies a survival strategy that Ottoman Jews formed through writing.[19] Another Salonican Jew, Maurice Nessim, complained in a column that every Ashkenazi periodical took advantage of the weakness of Ottoman Jews and employed stereotypes by insulting women in Orchard Street or in Harlem in New York just for being Sephardim. From the perspective of the established Jewish community, the newcomers from the Ottoman Empire and successor states demonstrated "strange" cultural habits and spoke alien languages such as Ladino, Turkish, Greek, and Arabic.[20] From this standpoint, they "gesticulated wildly, smoked *nargile* (the water pipe), drank thick coffee out of tiny cups and played *tavla* (backgammon) all day long at their cafes."[21] As Devin Naar highlights, whereas the wearing of a fez symbolized for the Sephardim their love of the Ottoman legacy and their loyalty to the Empire, in the United States, it represented the "backward Orient" and the "Terrible Turk," and so had to be removed.[22]

Even though it is possible to discern a rapprochement between Ashkenazim and Sephardim after the Second World War in the United States, through increased intermarriages, a failure of recognition can still be detected from secondary sources revealing their relationships, which show non–Ashkenazim clustered around the periphery of Jewishness in the United States and Canada.[23] Most of the francophone North African Jews immigrated to France, Israel and Canada, following the rise of Arab nationalism and the creation of the State of Israel. A small number of Iraqi and Egyptian Jews headed to Canada and the United States as well. Nadia Malinovich, for instance, reveals how some Sephardic Jews, not only from Morocco but also from Egypt, resented the ignorance of the Ashkenazim upon their arrival in postwar America which downgraded them to the category of "backward" people.[24] Similarly, in Quebec, historical documents in archival sources from the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada show how North African Jewish women were stigmatized and orientalized—by Ashkenazi philanthropist women in particular— during the council's reception of the North African women in the 20th century. It is important to note that "North African" was later replaced by the term "Sephardi"

in Quebec emphasizing the ancient and mythic side of the community. As such, the term "Sephardi" bestowed North African Jews to make a claim on their identity against the English-speaking Ashkenazim in Quebec.[25] Here, despite the existence of condescension or negative reaction within two communities, it is crucial to stress the important effort made by Ashkenazi Jewish organizations from the United States and Canada to help North African Jews in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Shoah.[26]

Learning From the Empirical: Canadian North African and Turkish Jewish Identity Formation in Montreal and Toronto

Since the 1910s, there have been both continuities as well as ruptures in the relations between Sephardic and Ashkenazic groups in Canada. Language especially becoming more salient with all its complexity pertaining to ethnicity and nation, shows how the intercommunal dynamics map onto one another in Quebec. The context in Toronto, however, remaining similar to the aforementioned relations in the United States, allows for rethinking of Canadian pluralism. In contrast to the Sephardic Jewry in the United States[27] and outside of Quebec in North America where they live "as a minority people, both among majoritarian gentile anglophones and majoritarian Jewish Ashkenazim," French-speaking Sephardic Jews living in Quebec have a uniquely distinguishable position.[28] The linguistic (French) dimension of Sephardim in Montreal, associated with a specific province (Quebec),[29] puts them in an unparalleled and complex setting which is open to negotiations as well as tensions. They are in a position of situating themselves between Ashkenazim to whom they are linked as Jews yet linguistically alien, and Franco-Quebecois, either secular or Catholic, to whom they are linguistically connected yet religiously foreign. Consequently, the francophone North African Jews I interviewed in this article find themselves navigating their difference between the Franco-Quebecois majority and the Ashkenazim in Quebec.

As mentioned in the introduction, the empirical data presented here is derived from twenty life-story interviews whose duration ranged from 60 to 180 minutes.[30] Recruitment for the interviews took place in three ways: I used the snowball sampling technique and asked for referrals from people I already knew in the community from acquaintances (a). I made a public announcement of my research on social media (b); I asked for referrals from the people I had just met and interviewed (c). I conducted interviews remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic from June 2020 to February 2021 when the participants and I were spending most of our time at home. I transcribed the interviews recorded as Zoom videos and shared the transcripts with research participants when requested to. Among the interviewees, eleven of those living in Montreal originated from southern and northern Morocco (10) and Tunisia

(1). In Toronto, I interviewed nine people, who originated from northern Morocco (5) and Turkey (4). I carried out my interviews with the people in Montreal in French, my interviews with the people in Toronto were conducted predominantly in English. I interviewed six women and five men in Montreal and four women and five men in Toronto, their ages ranged from sixty-four to ninety-two. All participants were informed that I was a non-Jewish female researcher who was born and raised in Turkey studying Canada's North African and Turkish Jews. For the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used.

Originally from Istanbul, Nissim met his Canadian-Polish wife in Israel before immigrating to Toronto in 1971 through family reunification. He stressed that his wife's grandmother did not believe that he was Jewish when he was first introduced to her. He recounted that she said, "Wait a minute! Turkey? Who is this Turkish guy? What kind of a Jew is Nissim? He doesn't speak a word of Yiddish."[31] Another interviewee, Robert, originally from Tangier and who immigrated to Canada with his family in 1957 when he was eleven, asserted that in some Ashkenazic environments in Toronto, they asked: "You're Jew and don't speak Yiddish? How come?" Having known two Ashkenazic co-workers in his previous workplace, this interviewee pointed out that Ashkenazi Jews did not consider him equal and complained that he was not a hard worker. According to Robert, this perception of him by his co-religionists in the workplace was a result of his Sephardic ethnic background. Yehuda, on the other hand, who was born in Tangier and immigrated to Canada in the 1960s when he was fifteen, underscored judgments pertaining to linguistic and cultural differences in encounters with his co-religionists:

> We don't speak Yiddish. . . Over the years, I have never seen a close relationship between my family and the Ashkenazi community. It's another community. . . Once, with some friends, I went to an Israeli restaurant here in Toronto. The waiter asked me something in Yiddish. I did not understand. I said, "Please, speak English." And he said to me, "What? Don't you speak Yiddish? But are you a Jew?" I said, "Yes," but I said "I am a Sephardic Jew. I can speak Spanish, but I cannot speak Yiddish." He didn't believe it and told me, "You are not really a Jew." (laughs). He was very disappointed. (My translation)

Jewish identity is often assumed to map onto a narrower ethnic and linguistic axis than is normally imagined, and the Montreal diaspora is a great example of that. In his analysis of texts written between 1954 and 1968 in *le Bulletin du Cercle Juif de langue Française* (the Bulletin of the French Language Jewish Circle), Jean-Philippe Croteau suggests that throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Bulletin wanted to culturally integrate French-speaking Jews into the Franco-Quebecois majority. It aimed to prevent the further anglicization of the community within majoritarian anglophone

Ashkenazim in Quebec. The Bulletin argued that French-speaking Jews, mostly North African, could maintain their religion among the English-speaking Jewish community while simultaneously associating with the French culture of the Franco-Quebecois in Quebec. According to the Bulletin, reconciling these two demands, linguistic on the one hand, and religious on the other, required a "dual integration" of the French-speaking Jews in Quebec.[32] Joseph, another Moroccan Jewish interviewee who immigrated to Quebec from Casablanca in the 1950s when he was twenty years old, asserted that he never felt he had been excluded by Quebec's Franco-Quebecois community but that he had been discriminated against by anglophone Ashkenazim. Joseph's narrative shows how language created a rapprochement with the Franco-Quebecois and thereby facilitated his integration into Quebec society.

Religious, cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities are not fixed but relational; only through relations with others can they disappear and be refashioned in new forms. Individuals and groups construct relations with surrounding persons and places within cultural, social, and structural relational contexts in a continuous conversation and "agency is always a dialogic process by which actors immersed in the *durée* of lived experience engage with others in collectively organized action contexts, temporal as well as spatial."[33] Beyond the question of intercommunal discrimination, the linguistic aspect therefore shows us how some francophone Jewish individuals have been co-opted into a broader politics of language in Quebec. Galia was born in southern Morocco and immigrated to Quebec from France in 1978. Her story describes a robust rapprochement to the Franco-Quebecois majority. However, language leads to a lesser rapprochement with Ashkenazim with whom she nonetheless is connected religiously:

> I don't have much contact with anglophones. I think the culture is also very different. It's a very different culture, the Ashkenazic culture. It's Nordic! We are very Latin. We are Sephardic; it's the Mediterranean. These are warm countries, so we really have a very different life vision. (My translation)

The following account from Julia, an interviewee who was born in Tangier and immigrated to Quebec in 1976 when she was ten years old illustrates the encounter with Ashkenazim through linguistic, ethnic, and traditional variations:

> It's improving but there is a very clear division. One, because language separates us. Tradition separates us and I would say that there is an Ashkenazic anglophone establishment which, in my opinion, has no place in the Sephardic community. . . The problem is not solved. Obviously, there is an evolution, but we still see this great separation. (My translation)

Manuel was born in Tangier and immigrated to Quebec in the 1980s, when he was forty-three years old. He details relations with his co-religionists in the province as follows:

> When Moroccan Jews arrived here . . . the Jewish community organizations were a hundred per cent Ashkenazi at the time because there were almost no Moroccan Jews who had come at the beginning to help them for their integration. But the human relationship of the Ashkenazic community and the Sephardic community was not ideal. They saw them, excuse me for the term, they saw them as primitive beings. . . They didn't speak Yiddish; they didn't understand why they didn't speak Yiddish. So, little by little with the new generation, now this has changed a lot. I am not coming from an English-speaking culture. . . I have more Sephardic and non-Jewish friends than Ashkenazic friends. Because we don't react emotionally, sentimentally in the same way. We are Latins, we have a Mediterranean character. We are exuberant . . . which is not common in an English-speaking setting. . . We cry when we have to cry, we laugh when we have to laugh. So, there you go (laughs). (My translation)

As the narratives recounted above suggest, North African and Turkish Jews in Montreal and Toronto reconstitute their identities vis-à-vis Ashkenazim differently. In Montreal, francophone North African Jews navigate their difference between Franco-Quebecois and anglophone Ashkenazim, which explains their dual integration strategy as historically documented in the *Bulletin*. Unlike in Montreal, where there is an additional linguistic dimension unique to Quebec, the relationships between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in Toronto are less complex. The Moroccan and Turkish Jews I interviewed in Toronto do not find themselves negotiating their difference between anglophone Gentiles and Ashkenazim. The peculiar linguistic dimension of Quebec, characterized by its bilingual divide and religious diversity, places francophone North African Jews in a complex setting where they negotiate their differences between Ashkenazim and Franco-Quebecois. In interviewing subjects for this article, blind spots pertaining to internal linguistic, cultural and traditional differences are apparent in the views projected upon interviewees by their co-religionists in both Canadian cities. By the relational contexts within which they enter, interviewees respond to their situation by recalling contested dynamics of those encounters through the interplay between language and religion, which is tantamount to grasping Canadian pluralism.

The wave of francophone and hispanophone Jewish immigration to Canada which started in the second half of the 20th century changed the demographic composition of Canadian Jewry. In Quebec especially, this wave of immigration in subsequent decades bolstered the francophone nature of the Jewry in the province. Reconstructing their identities between the majoritarian anglophone Ashkenazim and the

majoritarian Franco-Quebecois, the North African Jews I interviewed have a linguistic bond with the Franco-Quebecois majority. While navigating their difference between Franco-Quebecois and anglophone Jewish social networks, North African Jews created various institutions to ease the recognition of their community in Quebec. Hence, their integration, facilitated by language, led to the clouding of the boundary with the majority.[34] Zooming in their relationships with the Ashkenazim encouraged me to analyze their encounters through linguistic (Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, Spanish and French for Sephardim, and Yiddish and English for Ashkenazim), traditional, as well as cultural variations of the two groups. Looking at the existing literature, it is possible to see historical similarities in the relationships between the two groups, both in the United States and in the voices of my interviewees in Toronto. Yet in Quebec, we witness a unique context where language turns to be a prominent identity marker, and one that helps us understand intercommunal relations more deeply.

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It is crucial to note the two–sidedness of this failure of recognition. I wish to share more of what Nissim told me about the encounters between Sephardim and Ashkenazim that took place in 1970s Istanbul. When Nissim went to Istanbul with his Canadian-Polish Jewish wife, who was a friend at that time, to introduce her to his parents, his grandmother said, "She doesn't speak a word of Ladino. She is not Jewish, don't believe her." The stories of his own grandmother in Istanbul and his wife's grandmother in Toronto are perfect mirrors. In Turkey, if Jews did not speak Ladino, it was difficult for them to be considered Jewish because Ladino was the secret language of Jews.

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