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‘Inappropriate’ Voices from the Past: Contextualizing Narratives from the First Group Tour of *Olim* from Northern Morocco to Their Former Hometowns

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Abstract

This study is based on the analysis of some rare audio recordings from the first organized group tour of *olim* (Jewish immigrants in Israel) from northern Morocco, to their former hometowns in Morocco. The tour was organized in 1987 by MABAT, the principal émigré association of northern Moroccans in Israel during the 1980s. I compare this ‘free-style’-oral audio source with related printed-edited narratives, written by MABAT before and after the tour, showing an evolving tension between two forms of narration: the expected ethnic-oriented narration among individuals travelling together as MABAT members; and other ‘extra-ethnic’ narratives, encompassing contrasting spontaneous recollections from their childhood in Morocco. The conclusions reveal the often organized nature of vocally expressed ethnic voices; and the dynamic social environments that such voices represent, both before and after *aliyah* (immigration). The study offers a methodological and theoretical contribution to scholarship on ethnicity formation in Israel.

Keywords

olim/Jews of northern Morocco – MABAT (*Mifgash Bnei Tangir*) – collective narratives – audio recordings – ‘voices from the past’ – *Haketiá*

* *Olim*: Jewish immigrants in Israel; Northern Morocco: a common designation for the region that encompassed most of the Spanish protectorate zone in Morocco from 1912 until 1956, and the International Zone of Tangier from 1925 until 1956. The Jewish populations of this region had maintained a Hispanic-oriented, Judeo-Spanish culture and idiom that differentiated them from Jews in southern Morocco. Consequently, Jews from the region reclaimed a unique Judeo-Moroccan identity in post-migration contexts.

1 Introduction

I think I could say without being mistaken too much that . . . visiting the [Jewish] cemeteries and *zorear* [praying at saintly tombs] . . . was without doubt one of the peak moments of this trip.¹

With these words, Abraham Benabu concluded his impression from his first organized group tour to his former Moroccan hometown Tangier. After more than twenty years of residency in Israel he had not been back there. At the time, Abraham was the treasurer of MABAT (Hebrew acronym for *Mifgash Bnei Tangir*, 'Reunion of Tangier's Natives'), the principal émigré association of northern Moroccans in Israel, which had organized the tour to northern Morocco in July 1987. Abraham expressed those impressions in 'travel notes' published a few years later in the *MABAT Revista*, the association's main publication organ.²

Much of the scholarly and popular discourse concerning 'voices from the past' among *olim* from Arab and Muslim countries—that is, expressions of attachment to their culture of origin like the one expressed by Abraham—tended to depict these immigrants as persons still retaining their continuing and absolute, pre-immigration identities. Broadly speaking, until the late 1970s, a predominant Israeli national narrative perpetuating Israel's national 'melting pot' ethos attributed any multiple ethnic voices that contrasted with it to a slow ongoing process of assimilation into Israel's modern society. It was seen as particularly true for *olim* from non-European countries, as the representatives of the 'backward' and 'traditional-ethnic' element of Jewish society.³ Beginning in the 1980s, a critical approach began to challenge this view by highlighting 'innate' inequalities between hegemonic *Ashkenazim*⁴ and marginalized *Mizrahim*,⁵ supposedly structured in the Eurocentric Zionist venture. According to this view, it was the inequality that led the *Mizrahim* to

1 Abraham Benabu, "Notas de Viaje," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 97.

2 See below.

3 See Yaron Tsur, "The Israeli Historiography and the Ethnic Problem," in: *Making Israel*, ed. Benny Morris (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 234–235; Mikhaël Elbaz, "Exile from Within: Moroccan Jews and the Reinvention of Tradition in Israel," in: *Herméneutique Et Bricolage; Territoires Et Frontières de la Tradition Dans Le Judaïsme. Actes du Colloque de Bucarest, 27–28 Octobre 2006*, ed. Mădălina Vârtejanu-Joubert (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 209.

4 *Ashkenazi*: a widespread term used to denote Jews of European origin.

5 *Mizrahi*: 'Oriental' in Hebrew, commonly used by many scholars and in local Israeli parlance for describing the non-*Ashkenazi* social components: mostly Jews of Middle Eastern, North African and Central Asian origin. The term is confusing, and oversimplifies cultural and historical variations within the entire population. Throughout this study, I employ the term

actively silence their unique cultural voice; and thus, re-voicing it in Israel was seen as the correction of an historic injustice.⁶

Seen from the perspective of an erupting ethnic tension, ethnic voices from the past became mostly an embodiment of stable but silenced identities that one had to struggle in order to re-voice. In this connection, many studies on ethnicity formation in Israel focused mainly on the reasons for the voicing and silencing of *Mizrahi* voices. In so doing, they left only marginal space for exploring the dynamic nature of these voices: the historical pre-immigration societies that such voices represented, and/or the dynamic post-immigration environments and circumstances in which they came to be re-voiced. This short article is part of my ongoing broader exploration of the evolution of ethnic identities among Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, and seeks to point up their dynamic nature.⁷

This study is based on nine hours of audio recordings from the first organized visit of MABAT's members back home in Morocco in the summer of 1987.⁸ I compare this unedited source material with various edited, published sources, including the *MABAT Revista*, a 108-page review that summarized the association's activities over the past decade on the occasion of its tenth anniversary (1989–1990), and several earlier brochures and letters containing personal memoirs, articles, and announcements and summaries of MABAT's

Mizrahim as a discourse category only in order to accurately position my argument within the context of the broader discussion.

- 6 See Shlomo Deshen and Moshe Shokeid, *The Predicament of Homecoming: Cultural and Social Life of North African Immigrants in Israel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Shlomo Deshen and Moshe Shokeid, *The Generation of Transition: Continuity and Change among North Africa Immigrants in Israel* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1999) [Hebrew]. Both pointed out the clash of Moroccan traditions with Zionist modernity. Others adopted a post-colonial stance. See, for example, Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Sami Shalom Chetrit, *The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, Identification and Alternative, 1948–2003* (Tel-Aviv: Am-Oved, 2004) [Hebrew]. For further discussions see, i.e., Yaron Tsur, "Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel," *Journal of Israeli History* 18 (1997): 93–103.
- 7 See Aviad Moreno, "De-Westernizing Morocco: Pre-Migration Colonial History and the Ethnic-Oriented Self Representation of Tangier's Natives in Israel," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 4 (2012): 67–85; Aviad Moreno, *Ethnicity in Motion: Social Networks in the Emigration of Jews from Northern Morocco to Venezuela and Israel, 1860–2010* (Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2014).
- 8 The audio recordings are preserved in the Sound Archives of the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem (hereafter SA-JUNL). Songs in Judeo-Spanish (Tangier, 1987), SA-JUNL, Call No. Y-05697-a to Y-05697-f.

activities, distributed among its members during the 1980s. This combination of sources allows me to contextualize the narratives and understand their dynamic nature.

I start by exploring the character of MABAT and its activities, being the main social framework within which Jewish natives of northern Morocco came to narrate recollections from their past in Morocco in adherence to a unified, ethnic-oriented narrative in Israel of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁹ I then examine how individuals who traveled to their former hometowns as MABAT members witnessed the welling up of other pre-immigration voices, reflecting forgotten 'extra-ethnic' experiences that did not match the expected form of ethnic narration within MABAT. The conclusions reveal the dynamic nature of ethnic-oriented narration and contextualize it vis-à-vis 'extra-ethnic' voices, encompassing any voice that went beyond the typical discourse within the ethnic narrative's borders.

2 MABAT and Its Reconstructed Ethnic Narrative

The late 1970s and early 1980s in Israel saw the emergence of a form of *Mizrahi* 'revival,' which comprised several customs and rituals, including for example the *Mimouna* (a North African Jewish feast marking the end of Passover), which was celebrated publicly by the large Jewish-Moroccan minority in Israel. A new, vocal ethnic discourse appropriated by poets, musicians and authors accentuated the uniqueness of the *Mizrahi* minorities. This revival represented a counter-acculturation taking shape vis-à-vis the hegemonic *Ashkenazi*, European-oriented habitus in Israel during the nation's formative years.¹⁰

Against the backdrop of this dramatic transition, a process of ethnic revival took place among Jews of northern Moroccan origin in Israel. In October 1979, a group of pro-active *olim* from northern Morocco founded MABAT. Their main goal was to differentiate in cultural terms the group of northern Moroccans

9 On the role of oral narratives and proverbs throughout the formation of ethnic identities in Israel, see Tamar Alexander-Frizer, "Folk Literature as an Expression of Ethnic Identity," in: *The Heart is a Mirror, The Sephardic Folktale*, ed. Tamar Alexander-Frizer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 3–23; on *Haketic* proverbs as an expression of identity of the group, see Tamar Alexander-Frizer and Yaakov Bentolila, *La palabra en su hora es oro. El refrán judeoespañol en el Norte de Marruecos* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 142–172 [Hebrew], *31–*44 [Español].

10 Elbaz, "Exile from Within," 213–215; Tsur, "The Israeli Historiography," 246; As'ad Ghanem, *Ethnic Politics in Israel: The Margins and the Ashkenazi Centre* (London: Routledge, 2010), 63–76.

from the larger Moroccan population in Israel; or, as reflected in the words of MABAT main founder, Dr. Amada Nahon Avital: “We certainly have the obligation to increase awareness among the Israeli public of the fact that not all Jews of Moroccan origin are of a ‘*Magrebi*’ [North African] culture . . .”¹¹

MABAT’s activities were a historical episode that spanned roughly a decade and a half, between 1979 and the early 1990s. MABAT’s Spanish name, *Asociación de Oriundos de Tánger, Tetuán y demás ciudades de la ex-Zona Española de Marruecos, Ceuta, Melilla y Gibraltar*, demonstrated its aspirations to form an inclusive group of Spanish-speaking Moroccans. This Moroccan collective was based on their shared Hispanic origins, even if it meant that participants would come from political entities that extended beyond the historical borders of Morocco (Ceuta, Melilla and Gibraltar were not part of the Spanish protectorate in Morocco; neither of the independent Moroccan state founded in 1956).

The declared purposes of MABAT were fourfold: a) to maintain contact between the natives of the “former Spanish zone;” b) to preserve, “before it is too late,” their unique cultural, religious and folkloric patrimony; c) to collect cultural material; and d) to preserve the dialect of *Haketia*, a local Judeo-Spanish dialect, spoken daily by the majority of Jews in northern Morocco until the mid-nineteenth century.¹² Through its publications, the association presented itself as the main framework within which a northern Moroccan native living in Israel could relate to his or her past. For instance, some of MABAT’s slogans included: “Do not let yesterday expire; it is our foundation today;” or “Without a past, one cannot formulate a present. Come closer to your community! MABAT!”¹³

Reading MABAT’s written sources, one cannot overlook the association’s clear and comprehensive tendency to closely associate the group’s collective past with an idealized image of a flourishing, pious Judeo-Spanish community. Historically, during the mid-1900s, most Jews in northern Morocco’s central cities, Tangier and Tétouan, had spent most of their pre-migration day-to-day routine among Europeans as well as Muslims. Many attended non-Jewish European schools, shared working and dwelling milieus with non-Jews, became friends with them, and adopted some of their customs, occasionally

11 A letter circulated among MABAT members, 1988, 5. A private collection maintained by Sidney Pimienta and Gladys Pimienta, two siblings, Tangier natives, currently living in Bat-Yam, Israel (I refer to this collection hereafter as PPC).

12 Mitchell M. Serels, *A History of the Jews of Tangier in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New-York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1991), 177.

13 An announcement, *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 108.

some that were considered immoral within ethnic Jewish circles, such as violating the kosher dietary laws or attending Christian feasts.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the *MABAT Revista* encompassed narratives dealing in the main with generous Jewish philanthropists, respected communal leaders, flourishing Jewish educational institutions, the need for a strong Zionist affinity, and Sephardic folklore and musical traditions, and the like. In one case, Amram Luke, an active member of MABAT, narrated a story designed to glorify the religious scholars and great rabbis of Tangier, thereby instilling in the readers a sense of Jewish pious community that resonated from their past into the present.¹⁵

Consequently, MABAT's narrative was 'Judaizing' and 'Sephardicizing' the image of northern Morocco: it tended to mask elements from historical and day-to-day contacts with non-Jews, local Muslims and European Christians alike. The *MABAT Revista* stated, for instance, that Jews had been natural inhabitants of Morocco in a time much earlier than the arrival of the Arabs.¹⁶ More importantly, in Israel of the 1980s, MABAT was the main body that triggered the revival of the ancient local Judeo-Spanish dialect of *Haketia*. Historically, during the 1900s, this local ethnic dialect was rapidly vanishing among many Jews as their daily language underwent a process of 're-Hispanicization'—that is an adjustment of Semitic components in *Haketia* to modern Spanish phonetics, grammar and the general way of pronunciation. Within this context of transformation, the generation that would comprise MABAT members had encountered *Haketia* mostly among their parents and within the deep ethnic-communal spheres.¹⁷

MABAT's concentration on the revival of *Haketia* perhaps represented most clearly the evolving gap between the broader pre-migration history and its post-migration ethnic-oriented representation. MABAT encouraged *olim* from northern Morocco to recall and document memories regarding the dialect and submit them to be published. For example, while encouraging individuals to send in traditional recipes for a contest it organized, MABAT specifically asked the participants to recall anecdotes about the dish using *Haketic* terminology rather than simply "modernized" [sic] Spanish variants, as they would most naturally do otherwise.¹⁸

14 Moreno, "Ethnicity in Motion," 65; see below several reflections in interviews.

15 "Hilula," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 55.

16 Amada Aviatal, *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 8.

17 Yaakov Bentolila, "The Study of Moroccan Judeo-Spanish (Hakitia)," *El Presente: Studies in Sephardic Culture* 1 (2007): 160.

18 A letter entitled *Gran Concurso MABAT*, circulated among MABAT members, 1988, PPC.

Concomitantly, any 'extra-ethnic' narratives that did not match this image, such as stories about immoral religious behavior among Jews, or their disengagement from communal activities, would be removed from MABAT's collective narrative. As I have shown elsewhere, one of the reasons for reconstructing such an ethnic-oriented narrative reflected MABAT's aspiration to express an ethnic voice that would contrast the *Mizrahi* ethnic revival in Israel with a sense of their own ethnic heritage.¹⁹ The ethnic narrative allowed MABAT to represent themselves, vis-à-vis the general Moroccan image in Israel, as different Moroccans who could "contribute to the Israeli culture..." with their traditions, as expressed in the *MABAT Revista*.²⁰

Furthermore, MABAT's narrative comprising an idealized Judeo-Spanish ethnic past could in practical terms imbue its own activities with a sense of continuous communal life in Israel. For instance, the question "What was our community like?" which appeared in the *MABAT Revista* was followed by an additional question: "What were its concerns, and what have we been able to reproduce, here, today?"²¹ The next thirty-seven pages provided the anticipated 'answers' to these questions regarding the connection between ethnic past and ethnic present. For instance, MABAT published its plans to resume the 'tradition' back in Morocco of donating to the Jewish National Fund, by planting a forest, named after MABAT, in Israel in 1989.²²

In order to receive funds and also to imbue its activities with an image of scientific support, MABAT collaborated with academic institutions and with scholars dedicated to exploring aspects of the ethnic past. For instance, MABAT collaborated with Dr. Shoshana Weich-Shahak, a scholar who since 1973 has been recording and studying the Sephardic musical traditions at the Jewish Music Research Centre of the Hebrew University. Dr. Weich-Shahak used the *MABAT Revista* to call upon MABAT members to collaborate with her in research on northern Moroccan Jewish ethnic melodies.²³

19 Moreno, "De-westernizing Morocco," 67–85.

20 Salomon Benhayon, "Saludos del Presidente de MABAT," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 3.

21 A.S. "¿Cómo era nuestra comunidad?—¿Cuáles eran sus preocupaciones? Y nosotros hoy, aquí, ¿qué hemos podido reactualizar?," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 13.

22 "El Keren Kayemet Le-Israel," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 18; "El Bosque de MABAT," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 19.

23 Shoshana Weich, "Investigación de la Tradición Musical Sefaradí de Marruecos," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 61–62.

3 The Borders of MABAT's Narrative: The Biographical Perspective

Unlike the clearer concentrations of Moroccans in development towns across Israel's geographic periphery, the relatively small group of self-defined northern Moroccans lacked clear concentrations that would have enabled them to maintain ethnic distinctiveness.²⁴ However, by 1985, at least 769 members who lived in 70 cities and towns in Israel had joined MABAT.²⁵ They paid membership dues of 5,000 Israel (old) shekels and traveled from time to time within Israel to participate in MABAT's organized events and activities. Some proactive members helped reconstruct and disseminate the collective ethnic narrative fostered by the association.²⁶

This collaboration, which helped to forge MABAT's network, should not be taken for granted: MABAT members often would have to travel some distance in order to take part in communal activities. Moreover, they had to shift from their day-to-day routine into an ethnic state of mind, masking aspects of their extra-ethnic past and present along the way.

In order to understand this transition, we need to look at some extra-ethnic narratives outside MABAT's representative but restrictive framework of narration.

Some sources reveal behaviors that would expose the gap between MABAT's reconstructed ethnic image of the past and the way many individuals remembered their life routine in Morocco separately, outside MABAT's ad-hoc network. For instance, in an interview conducted in Israel in 2010 with Simi, a

24 Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Stephen Sharot, *Ethnicity, Religion and Class in Israeli Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 65, 71; Seymour Spilerman and Jack Habib, "Development Towns in Israel: The Role of Community in Creating Ethnic Disparities in Labor Force Characteristics," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1976): 789.

25 According to a list of telephone numbers of MABAT members in Israel, 1985, the five cities with the largest populations of MABAT members were: Jerusalem (72 members), Netanya (49), Bat-Yam (42), Petah-Tikva (38), and Ashdod (35). However, the 769 registered members lived in 70 Israeli towns, villages, kibbutzim and cities, not to mention different neighborhoods within each area, even within the five large cities mentioned. Some towns, including Azur, Or-Yehuda, Kfar-Shmaryahu, Atlit, Netivot, Mizpe-Ramon, and Sderot, had only one MABAT member each (see a list of telephone numbers of MABAT members in Israel, 1985, PPC).

26 Several circulars indicated that MABAT's organizational activities were conducted in several cities across Israel, including Jerusalem, Kiryat Gat, Tel-Aviv, Beersheba etc.; see a circular sent to MABAT members, September 19, 1985, PPC, 3; a circular sent to MABAT members summarizing the organization's activity from its founding in November 1979 to April 1988, December 13, 1988, PPC, 2.

former MABAT member, who grew up in Tétouan, she mentioned a dispute she had with her father over her intention to watch a street parade on New Year's Eve in her hometown. She showed me a picture of her young uncle attending such a party, stating: "He was not like my father . . . my father did not even allow me to eat a grape [referring to the Spanish custom of eating twelve grapes at midnight on New Year's Eve]."²⁷

Alegría Bendelac, who lived in the U.S., mentioned in her 1987 memoir that despite her father's objection, her mother used to buy her a small present at Christmas time. Her mother handed it to her at a special type of ceremony, since she did not want her daughters to feel deprived in front of their non-Jewish classmates.

In the 1940s and 1950s in northern Morocco, many individuals oscillated in their life routine between ethnic-communal (Judeo-Spanish) spheres of identification, and extra-ethnic (colonial and Moroccan) spheres, representing their other local identities. The same was true in Israel, where one would 'became ethnic' only on certain occasions. However, in Israel of the 1980s, unlike Morocco of the 1940s and 1950s, under circumstances of dispersion, most gathering opportunities as a self-defined ethnic collective were organized by MABAT. They thereby were subjected to MABAT's ethnic-oriented activities, discourses and narratives. Thus, while gathering as a community, many Jewish natives of northern Morocco referred to their past in clear ethnic terms that masked much of their pre-immigration life experience.

Consequently, some MABAT members occasionally struggled to recall ethnic voices. The musicologist Dr. Weich-Shahak stated that she had to work hard in order to retrieve *Haketic* utterances, melodies and lyrics from her informants, since, with the passage of time, these voices had become vague memories, even in Morocco.²⁸ Moreover, at times MABAT's ethnic orientation exposed some of its members, even the most active ones, to unfamiliar voices from 'their own' past.

For instance, the *MABAT Revista* published an article concerning a 'traditional' custom among the Jews of Tétouan to place a '*matesha*,' a swing, in their patios after Passover. According to the article, the custom had a social function, enabling young, unmarried girls to meet potential husbands. The article was accompanied by the publication of a sporadic romance, known as "The Matesha Songs," which, according to the author, was commonly sung in the northern Moroccan city of Tétouan.²⁹ In an interview held several decades

27 An interview with Simi (pseudonym), Israel, 2009, interviewer: Aviad Moreno.

28 A conversation with Dr. Weich-Shahak, Israel, 2009, Aviad Moreno.

29 Gladys Pimienta, "Los Cantes de Matesha (Resumen)," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 65–66.

later with the author Gladys Pimienta, who was an active MABAT member and had spent most of her teenage years in northern Morocco, she remarked with great honesty: "Many of the songs I have collected here [namely, in Israel],³⁰ including this one, I had never heard of in Morocco, nor did my mother, I think [smiling]."³¹

Likewise, Prof. Ya'acov Bentolila, a Tétouan native who became the leading scholar in research on *Haketia*, asserted that most *Haketic* verbs and words came to his attention only in the 1980s, when he started conducting his research into the dialect.³² According to him, the stimulus for his academic interest in *Haketia* was one of MABAT's gatherings in 1983, to which he had been invited to lecture on the dialect as a philologist who was also a Tétouan native.³³ Earlier, he dedicated his academic career to research on Hebrew linguistics, but since then much of his scholarship had focused on *Haketia* in addition.³⁴ Ya'acov's and Gladys' honest statements were part of their own personal narratives regarding their past. In retrospect, these statements reflect the boundaries of MABAT's ethnic narrative in the 1980s.

4 Re-encountering Morocco as MABAT Members

In July 1986, King Hassan II opened the borders of Morocco to visits of Israeli citizens. The initiative led to organized tour groups which were characterized by clusters of close friends and/or small familial groups who visited typical tourist sites, in addition to family graves and saint tombs and other Jewish

30 While conducting a project of preservation, mostly at the Ma'ale Adumim Institute for the Documentation of Judeo-Spanish Language and its Culture, affiliated within the Sefarad Society.

31 An interview with Gladys Pimienta, Israel, 2010, interviewer: Aviad Moreno.

32 Reuven Shabat, "Learning is Never Boring," *Etrog—Education Journal* (2008) [Hebrew], <http://www.itu.org.il/?CategoryID=1461&ArticleID=12590> (last accessed January 8, 2011).

33 An interview with Yaakov Bentolila, Israel, 2010, interviewer: Aviad Moreno.

34 See Yaakov Bentolila, *The Sociophonology of Hebrew as Spoken in a Rural Settlement of Moroccan Jews in the Negev* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1983) [Hebrew]; Yaakov Bentolila, "Le composant hébraïque dans le judéo-espagnol marocain," in: *Judeo-Romance Languages*, eds. Isaac Benabu and Joseph Sermoneta (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim; Hebrew University, 1985), 27–40. For more on similar professional-biographical transformations in related fields see Tamar Alexander-Frizer, *The Heart is a Mirror: The Sephardic Folktale* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 569–576. I thank Prof. Tamar Alexander-Frizer for kindly enlightening me with her comments regarding this phenomenon.

sites.³⁵ A year later, in July 1987, MABAT took the initiative of organizing a similar tour for its members.

According to MABAT's plans, as reflected in the handouts given to the participants, the tour was obviously designed to create an ethnic-oriented experience for the participants. The program included meetings with community leaders, prayers, a visit to local cemeteries, and tours to the former typical 'Jewish areas' of Tangier and Tétouan. By chance or not, the visit to Tangier, the largest northern Moroccan city from which most MABAT members came, was scheduled over a weekend, between Wednesday evening and Saturday night. In such a way the activities could stimulate voices of recollection from ethnic events on the Sabbath. On Friday night, a festive *arvit* (evening prayer) at the local synagogue and a traditional Sabbath eve dinner were scheduled. On Saturday morning, the organizers planned an *adafina* and *horrisa* meal (two traditional longer-cooked stews, customarily eaten on the Shabbat) at the hotel, and a meeting with community leaders. Sunday was dedicated to the "visiting of ancient places and, of course, to the tradition of *zorear* [visit of graves] of our beloved ones." On Monday, the group visited the famous Rabbi's tomb in Ouazzane, on the outskirts of Tétouan and Tangier.³⁶

Dr. Weich-Shahak, who joined the excursion as an academic escort, encouraged the participants to recall ethnic anecdotes, such as romances and stories in *Haketia*, as well as other ethnic customs. Such ethnic anecdotes indeed arose, as people stimulated and facilitated each other's recollections. Seemingly, this form of collective recollection usually took place within segregated communal buildings or within the private bus that had been hired for them. For instance, during the trip to the Jewish cemetery in Ouazzane, Dr. Weich-Shahak managed to encourage the travelers to join in the singing of several religious melodies, mainly with the assistance of a rabbi who had joined the group.³⁷ On the bus, two siblings narrated aloud a story about their grandmother who, according to their account, was a famous midwife in the service of Tangier's community.³⁸ Another participant, stimulated by a conversation with Dr. Weich-Shahak,

35 André Levy, "Homecoming to the Diaspora: Nation and State in Visits of Israelis to Morocco," in: *Homecomings: Unsettling Paths of Return*, eds. Anders H. Stefansson and Fran Markowitz (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2004), 98.

36 A program of MABAT organized tour to northern Morocco that was circulated among its members, April 30, 1987, PPC.

37 Songs in Judeo-Spanish (Tangier, 1987), SA-JUNL, Call No. Y-05697-c.

38 Songs in Judeo-Spanish, Y-05696-f, Y-05697-a.

attempted to link his family's origins to the Spanish city of Albacete in medieval Spain.³⁹

However, the re-encounter of MABAT members with their forgotten childhood's landscapes during the trip obviously provided endless opportunities for the emergence of voices that would potentially go beyond the MABAT ethnic-oriented collective narrative. Thus, while the main idea behind Dr. Weich-Shahak's initiative to record parts of the trip was to collect ethnic-oriented material, the vast body of recordings also enabled a sufficient glimpse into 'contrasting' voices. In this connection, the recordings also allow a glimpse into the individuals' transformation back into an ethnic state of mind once a 'crossing' of the narrative's boundary was identified.

First of all, the recordings illustrate the predictable: that re-encountering forgotten sights caused great excitement among natives of northern Morocco, who spontaneously began to speak about their childhood experiences, memories that were not central to MABAT's planned narrative. For example, after a long ride on the bus, upon entering Tangier, the audio recording corroborated that enthusiastic remarks were uttered each time a long-forgotten site was spotted: "Here is the park where we used to sit . . . oh, God;" "There's the *Cine Goya* [movie theatre] where we used to go!;" "There's the *Emsalleh* [then a Muslim neighborhood]!;" "Wasn't the *Galerie Lafayette* [department store] here?" These comments represented just a few among many other such remarks that would be seen as 'less significant' memories and experiences from the perspective of MABAT's ethnic narrative.

More interestingly, the recording illustrated a form of 'inappropriate' voices that not only did not match MABAT's form of narration but even contrasted with it. For instance, a few songs recollected from childhood were bawdy, childishly mentioning sexual relations and sex organs. Sounds of giggling in the background reveal that this sort of narration, in front of Dr. Weich-Shahak, cause some participants to feel embarrassed. The extra-ethnic songs evoked some intimate conversations about life routines in northern Morocco's colonial cities. Among the stories, a woman started narrating about her participation in New Year's celebrations. She mentioned that she had "a good-looking Christian friend." At this point, the recording suddenly stops for some unknown reason. The recording resumed a moment later, capturing an unfolding narrative about common local childhood games.

Later on, a man from the group came to narrate recollections of Jewish celebrations, including the *bar mitzvah* ceremony. Then, he was diverted by a remark by his (female) compatriot who asked about "what happened in the

39 Ibid.

night before.” The narrator then revealed the existence of a common ‘tradition’ among adolescents to gather together in order to play cards, smoke, and then use the services of a street prostitute in the city on the eve before the religious ceremony of *bar mitzvah* took place at the synagogue.⁴⁰ There are no written documents regarding this adolescent custom; yet it was one ‘unnarrated’ story within MABAT’s social frame, that exposed narratives from the pre-immigration past, narrated in first-person plural, like many of MABAT’s ethnic narratives.

In another incident, unfolding in the midst of a discussion concerning nicknames, which took place at a café in the center of Tangier, a few participants associatively recalled a song sung on Christmas eve, entitled “*La Noche Buena*.” Other participants joined in singing along another Spanish Christmas song, “*Todos le llevan al Niño*.” Surprised by these incidents, Dr. Weich-Shahak, wondered who used to sing these songs and whether it was a marginal phenomenon. Several recorded members of MABAT replied immediately and unanimously that it had been a common custom among “all Jews.” One participant felt the need to explain to Dr. Weich-Shahak that the songs used to be part of their childhood leisure culture in northern Morocco, when they used to participate in a street festival called ‘*comparsa*’ during the Christmas season.⁴¹

Even more instructive was the trigger that eventually stopped the cheerful singing and abruptly halted the collective narratives about this shared non-Jewish, extra-ethnic tradition among northern Moroccan natives. It was a remark in a low voice noting that the rabbi was present. The singer then immediately apologized, using the Hebrew expression: “*sliha, sliha!*” [‘Sorry, sorry!’].

Analyzing the subtext of this occurrence may reveal how such songs were seen as inappropriate within certain contexts. These behaviors were in fact ‘inappropriate,’ because within the given social context, MABAT’s members were expected to express a completely different voice from their past as an ethnic group. Spontaneous, extra-ethnic recollections shared by many were a prime example of an erupting broader hybrid collective narrative, cut short by its existence within the ethnic framework within which the trip was organized. Thus, the extra-ethnic story stimulated a re-entry into the ethnic state of mind: one woman told a story about the generosity of Tangier’s Jewish community, which hosted Jewish European refugees during the Second World War.

Seemingly, for many participants the ethnic-oriented form of narration constituted something that indeed represented their collective past, albeit one that also embodied an irony within the context of the trip. The irony was that

40 Ibid., Y-05698-b.

41 Ibid., Y-05696-f.

these stories, regardless of their centrality to MABAT's organized tour, sometimes reflected only a minor fraction of their recollections, and therefore were marginal to their collective experience upon re-encountering forgotten landscapes. Therefore, the situation evoked humorous gestures that attempted to reduce the resulting tension between the two forms of collective narration.

For instance, the recordings reflected a repetitive tendency to accentuate *Haketia's* typical pronunciation, or *Haketic* phrases, with jocularity. Some people imitated with amusement the guttural phonetics of the ancient idiom, which sounded rather peculiar to a modern ear used to Castilian Spanish, as they themselves were.⁴² In one incident, a woman from Tétouan mentioned that in her family, there were five girls. Another member interrupted her words, jocularly shouting: "Never say five, say 'your hand.'" The latter was a phrase reflecting the traditional superstition to avoid using the word 'five' directly, as it might cause bad luck. The comment invoked collective laughter due to the appearance of this ethnic memory that was probably viewed as odd in retrospect. At that moment, the woman, who had been speaking modern Spanish, noticeably altered her intonation, replying in *Haketic* style: "Yes, to flee from the evil eye" ("*Sí, para escapar del 'ayin ha-ra'*"). While uttering the sentence, she accentuated the guttural phonetics in a typical *Haketic* way, causing laughter among others.

Subsequently, during the ride to the saintly rabbi's tomb in Ouazzane, one of the participants spontaneously made a traditional ululation kind of high-pitched howl. In response, another participant was recorded commenting jokingly about this spontaneous gesture: "[It's] like the black people of Africa . . ."⁴³ In another incident, one participant interrupted an attempt to tell Dr. Weich-Shahak how Tangier had deteriorated because the Jews had left by loudly singing a modern Spanish (non-Jewish) song called "*Desde que tú te fuiste*" ('Since You Left'). Several people joined in the singing, interrupting the woman's ethnic narrative. Such interruptions constituted per se a form of collective narration. It highlighted the clear gaps between the ethnic narrative and the extra-ethnic experiences and their forms of narration, and thus the dynamic nature of expressed ethnic identities.

As it would appear, during the trip, extra-ethnic memories contrasted with the image of Morocco reconstructed among the group within the ethnic context, but were much more emotional, probably because they had been slowly erased from the collective memory during the years in Israel. Now for the first

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., Y-05697-c.

time, sometimes after decades away from Morocco, some *olim* could experience them together, as a group, within their new communal framework.

5 Back to Israel

A comparison of narratives, and other expressed voices overheard on the audio recordings with the impressions that MABAT chose to share from the trip through its subsequent publication make the gap between the ethnic and extra-ethnic narratives highly apparent. Abraham Benabu, the treasurer of MABAT, who had participated in the trip (an enthusiastic private discussion he held with his friends about their childhood was captured on tape), in fact wrote about his emotional experience in Tangier, in adherence to the ethnic narrative.

From the beginning of his essay, Abraham sought to reduce the experience of the trip to the level of a collective ethnic memory. In fact, his first “memories,” in his own words, from the trip undermined the significance of re-encountering Morocco itself. He wrote:

The first encounter with *our memories* had already occurred in Madrid, where the members of the [local Jewish] community smothered us with attention, including the Israeli ambassador, his Excellency Sir S. Ben-Ami...⁴⁴

Subsequently, Abraham mentioned an encounter with the Jewish community in Gibraltar, where the group stopped in order to participate in a festive dinner, which included the singing of *piyyutim* (*piyyut*, a religious, liturgical poem) and Sephardic romances. In this context, the current landscape of northern Morocco was depicted through his words with contempt, wrapped in sorrow for the loss of Jewish life:

Then we got off [the bus] for half an hour at the *Plaza España* (I do not remember the new name [sic!])... No, it is no longer the same clear and pure pearl of the Spanish Zone that we used to know before. Today, there are no more than two *Jewish families* living there.⁴⁵

44 Abraham Benabu, “Notas de Viaje,” *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 96.

45 Ibid.

Within this context, Abraham asserted that the participants, who came from Tétouan, had only one wish upon their arrival in the city: to go to the Jewish cemetery, in order to visit the graves of their relatives and ancestors, masking, and reducing in importance, much of the personal and collective experiences captured on tape.⁴⁶ Obviously, few of his written narratives embodied the most significant personal experiences for Abraham, in comparison with his overall experience while re-encountering his childhood city (as clearly heard throughout the recording).

Another visitor's impression by Salomon Benhayon expressed the same notion even more strongly. Many of his comments concerned the aspirations of the visitors to find their relatives' and ancestors' graves, as if the graves were the only living evidence of their lives in the city. Small wonder then that the adjacent photograph showed a woman mourning at the Jewish cemetery in Tétouan in the early twentieth century.⁴⁷

MABAT was the principal émigré association of northern Moroccans in Israel who wished to reconnect with their pre-immigration ethnic origins. Its narrative thus became the main 'display window' for the group's self-representation within the context of ethnicity formation in Israel in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, MABAT members were in fact willing to mask 'inappropriate' voices and memories welling up from their past to achieve the social goal of self-definition vis-à-vis other ethnicities. In so doing, they accentuated ethnic moments and places from Morocco, in order to reconstruct ethnic moments and places in Israel. Small wonder then that during the group tour, the collective re-encounter with their home towns resulted in narration-based tensions: the re-encounter triggered challenging, 'inappropriate' voices from the past that generated an alternative collective narrative. The proceeding efforts by MABAT to silence such extra-ethnic narratives within its own post-tour narrative served as further indication of the gap between history and its dynamic form of representation after migration through memory.

This study should thus further challenge the general scholarly and popular notion that 'voices from the past' among Jews from Arab and Muslim countries in Israel represent continuing and absolute ethnic voices that persons would struggle to express or silence within the context of Israeli ethnic tension. As seen at least in the case of northern Moroccans in Israel, the ethnic voice evolved throughout the process of giving it voice. Moreover, throughout the process, the voiced appeared to be multifaceted, highly dynamic and

46 Ibid., 97.

47 Salomon Benhayon, "Viaje MABAT," *MABAT Revista* 1 (1989–1990): 98–99.

contextual; and most interestingly, strongly depended on social networks that would energize it.

Consequently, it is hoped this study provides a methodological contribution to historians' efforts to reconstruct voices from the past. Despite the critical contributions of edited narratives, they raise methodological obstacles and lacunae: they restrict our ability to trace the shifting mindsets of narrators within dynamic social environments throughout the process of narration. We may begin to overcome this lacuna by means of cross-referencing sources that enable access to more 'free-style' forms of narration: wide-ranging materials including audio recordings and interviews that can provide richer information about the narrators and the context of narration.

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