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del Norte de Marruecos

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Índice

Prólogo	1
<i>Historia:</i>	9
Yom Tov Assis	
The Jews of the Maghreb and Sepharad: A Case Study of Inter-Communal Cultural Relations through the Ages	11
María José Cano, Beatriz Molina y Elena Mironesko	
La visión de la alteridad entre judíos, cristianos y musulmanes en los libros de viajes y las crónicas: El caso de Marruecos según las Crónicas de Expulsión hispano-hebreas	31
Gérard Nahon	
Tetuán, Alcázar y Mequines frente al “Mesías” José ben Sur: la opción entre <i>Turkya</i> y <i>Frankya</i> (1675)	53
Pablo Martín Asuero	
El encuentro de los españoles con los sefardíes de Marruecos a la luz de Pedro de Alarcón	67
Aldina Quintana	
El <i>Mellah</i> de Tetuán (1860) en <i>Aita Tettauen</i> (1905) de Benito Pérez Galdós: Cambios de actitud frente a los estereotipos antisemitas en la España de la Restauración	81
Alisa Meyuhas Ginio	
El encuentro del senador español Dr. Ángel Pulido Fernández con los judíos del Norte de Marruecos	111
Rena Molho	
The Moral Values of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and their Impact on the Jewish School World of Salonika and Morocco	127
Gila Hadar	
Gender Representation on the Dark Side of <i>Qidushin</i> : Between North Morocco and the Balkans (Monastir)	139

<i>Lingüística:</i>	157
Yaakov Bentolila	
La lengua común (coiné) judeo-española entre el Este y el Oeste	159
David Bunis	
The Differential Impact of Arabic on <i>Ḥaketía</i> and Turkish on Judezmo	177
Cyril Aslanov	
La haquetía entre hispanidad y aloglotismo: divergencia y convergencia	209
Ora (Rodrigue) Schwarzwald	
Between East and West: Differences between Ottoman and North African Judeo-Spanish <i>Haggadot</i>	223
Isaac Benabu	
Jewish Languages and Life after Death: Traces of <i>Ḥaketía</i> among the Jews of Gibraltar	243
<i>Literatura, folclore y música:</i>	253
Paloma Díaz-Mas	
Las mujeres sefardíes del Norte de Marruecos en el ocaso de la tradición oral	255
Oro Anahory-Librowicz	
La imagen del musulmán y del cristiano a través de la narrativa popular sefardí de la zona norte de Marruecos	267
Nina Pinto-Abecasis	
El entramado de las relaciones entre las comunidades judías del Marruecos español en el espejo del chiste y el mote	283
Susana Weich-Shahak	
<i>Me vaya kapará</i> – La haketía en el repertorio musical sefardí	291
Lista de colaboradores	301

Jewish Languages and Life after Death: Traces of *Haketía* among the Jews of Gibraltar

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Introduction

Since the oral transmission of culture became the subject of serious academic study at the end of the nineteenth century, scholars have come to recognize the pivotal role it must play in all considerations of cultural dynamics. With regard to Judeo-Spanish culture, research has shown that the assimilatory forces of the dominant or co-territorial culture in which the Jews settled after the Expulsion, in both the eastern and the western Mediterranean, threatened not only to obliterate their cultural heritage as a whole but their language in particular. As in the case of other Jewish languages, Judeo-Spanish was bound to suffer from such an impact due to the fact that the medium for transmission was the spoken rather than the written word. In addition, the displacement of the traditional speech communities during and shortly after the Second World War at both ends of the Mediterranean, as well as contact with the new cultures in which these Jews settled, seemed to augur badly for the survival of Judeo-Spanish culture. Furthermore, Judeo-Spanish has all but lost its currency as a spoken language – in the home and in the street – because the language is no longer transmitted to succeeding generations in the traditional fashion. Nevertheless, an ever-increasing number of people are taking to the pen to write in the language and about its culture. It is the case of a once-spoken language looking to the written word for preservation – and the written word, in turn, becoming the medium for the transmission of a culture and a guardian against its annihilation.

The first part of the title of this paper seeks, not without intended humour, to refer to the renaissance of interest in Judeo-Spanish culture as “life after death”. Application of the term “language death” produces emotional reactions and often provokes heated

discussion.¹ The field of linguistics employs the term, however, to describe the process by which a language ceases to possess currency in everyday transactions – usually because the community of speakers has emigrated – with the result that the language is no longer transmitted from one generation to the next. This is the case with Judeo-Spanish communities at both ends of the Mediterranean. Yet although the language’s function as everyday speech has been lost, in much the same way as noted with regard to Judeo-Spanish in both the eastern and western Mediterranean, interest in the culture has flourished in those countries to which the Jews of Northern Morocco moved. The dynamism of this Jewish language has seen a renaissance of creative energies in, for example, literature and music. It is this “resilience”, for want of a better word, that I wish to explore in the speech of the Jews of Gibraltar.

In order to fit the speech of Gibraltar Jews into its linguistic context, a brief outline of some historical and sociolinguistic considerations affecting the speech of the communities at its western end, *Ḥaketía*, and a cursory look at the distribution of speech centres is in order. From 1391 onwards, the wave of anti-Jewish feeling which swept the Iberian Peninsula drove many Jews to settle in the nearest country which offered them refuge – North Africa. The main centres where *Ḥaketía* was spoken, in one form or another, are found in or near the northern coast of Morocco: from Melilla (a Spanish enclave near the border with Algeria) through Tetuán – traditionally the rabbinic seat of the ‘comunidades de Castilla’ and once known as ‘Yerushalayim la chica’ – to nearby Chauen, then Ceuta (another Spanish enclave), to Tangiers, perhaps once the most populous centre. Across the Straits lies Gibraltar, and towards the Atlantic coast of North Africa are Larache, Alacazrquivir, and Arsila – ‘las comunidades del estrecho’ as they are frequently referred to.

Interestingly in respect to *Ḥaketía*, the most pressing threat of extinction came not from the dissolution of the traditional speech centres, or even from emigration, but from the renewed impact of peninsular Spanish in the second half of the nineteenth century. As speakers acquired fluency in the language of the new colonial power,

1 See David Crystal, *Language Death*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; Tracy K. Harris, *Death of a Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish*, University of Delaware Press, Newark 1994; idem, “Death of a Language Revisited: Reactions, Results and Maintenance Efforts on behalf of Judeo-Spanish since 1994”, *Proceedings of the Thirteenth British Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies*, London, September 7-9, 2003; Dept. of Hispanic Studies, London 2006, pp. 63-74.

the speech which had endured for centuries blended in some cases with its modern counterpart, and eventually was all but completely assimilated into it. The language of the Spanish Jews who had settled in North Africa centuries before no longer held currency, and with mounting outbreaks of anti-Semitism in the 1950's the traditional centres in the western Mediterranean became almost devoid of their once illustrious Jewish communities.

Following the emigration of large numbers of Jews from the towns of Northern Morocco in the late 1950's, other centres have grown, wherever a community of these Spanish-speaking Jews settled: in Israel, Canada, Venezuela, and Argentina, and to a smaller extent in Spain, France, and Brazil. It is yet to be determined how many of these Jews still used *Ḥaketía* as their everyday medium of communication at the time they left North Africa. In many of the countries to which these Jews moved, the last few years have witnessed the birth of strong movements for the conservation of their cultural heritage. Less attention has been paid, however, to recording the speech of the older inhabitants.

In the linguistic survey of *Ḥaketía* I conducted in 1980/81 in Tetuán and Tangier, it quickly became clear that it was very late in the day to be working on a description of the language.² The only speakers I found in both centres were living in old-age homes, and their speech was, but for the occasional idiom, normative Spanish. I recall one informant from Tetuán who, when asked to describe preparations for Passover Seder night, described these in Spanish, yet repeatedly reminded herself that she should be depicting them in *Ḥaketía* – because, as she pointed out, like previous researchers that was surely where my interests lay! Despite her attempts to employ *Ḥaketía*, the language she spoke remained preponderantly Spanish throughout. Another informant, this time in an old-age home in Tangier, wasted no time in correcting me when I mentioned the term “*Ḥaketía*”: “That’s what they call the language spoken by Turkish Jews”! Yet *Ḥaketía* was definitely identifiable in the songs these residents sang and in the stories they narrated. (For example, in one old-age home in Tangiers, when the women met in the courtyard of an afternoon to tell stories, the use of *Ḥaketía* figured prominently in their narrations.) It became clear, too, that Benoliel’s work in the '30's may have already been “archeological”: rather than recording the speech, he

2 Some of the results of this survey have been published in Isaac Benabu, “Humorous Tales from Morocco in Western Judeo Spanish: A Linguistic Study”, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklores*, 5-6 (1984), pp. 123-150 (Hebrew).

set himself the task of collecting the remnants of *Haketía*.³ Spanish had become too widespread a currency in the area for too long a period and had eroded the everyday use of *Haketía* as a medium for communication.

I have already alluded here to the resilience manifested by a Jewish language: Hebrew may have been the first of this family of languages to demonstrate its refusal to die. I do not know whether the term “linguistic resilience” exists, but this is how I wish to refer to the survival of Judeo-Spanish idioms within the Gibraltar Jewish community whose members no longer speak Judeo-Spanish and where the impact of Modern Spanish has eroded the use of older forms. While in most cases there are acceptable alternative idioms in the variety of Spanish the community uses in its everyday speech, speakers nonetheless prefer to opt for those deriving from *Haketía* – when they find themselves among other local Jews, of course; these idioms do not feature, even accidentally, when they are engaged in conversations with non-Jewish locals. The position is not unlike that of the use of Yiddish or Yiddish-based idioms in Israel and the diaspora, whose speakers maintain that Yiddish possesses an expressivity not attainable in their co-territorial language. What is striking in the case of the idioms drawn from *Haketía*, however, is that despite being composed of identifiable Spanish words, a non-Jewish Spanish speaker would be hard put to interpret their meaning.

Some historical details about the presence of Jews on the Rock⁴

The earliest reference to the presence of Jews in Gibraltar dates from the early fourteenth century (1310), when Ferdinand IV of Castile issued a declaration designating Gibraltar as a free port for Christians, Moors, and Jews, and authorizing – encouraging, in fact – Jews and Moors to trade their wares without being subject to levies. A document also exists dating from 1356, issued by the Jewish community of

3 For a detailed study of the Jewish community of Gibraltar, see Mesod Benady, “The Settlement of Jews in Gibraltar 1704-1783”, *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, 26 (1979), pp. 87-110; idem, “The Jewish Community of Gibraltar”, Richard D. Barnett and Walter M. Schwab (eds.), *The Sephardi Heritage*, Gibraltar Books, Grendon, Northants 1989, Vol. 2, pp. 144-181.

4 See Diego Lamelas, *La compra de Gibraltar por los conversos andaluces 1474–76*, Madrid, 1976.

Gibraltar in an appeal for assistance in collecting the ransom for Jews captured by pirates. About a century or so later, in 1474, a group of *conversos* headed by Pedro de Herrera, who had been forced to abandon their native city of Cordoba, bought Gibraltar for a considerable sum from the Duke of Medina Sidonia. The sale was revoked two years later in 1476 because of pressure by the forces which led to the Expulsion.⁵

There is no mention of Jews for the next 200 years, yet in a rather curious legal document dated 1679, Benjamin Gabay, described therein as ‘judío de nación y vecino de Gibraltar’, petitions an episcopal court in Ceuta for non-payment of merchandise (tobacco and other goods) supplied to the brother of the Dean of the monastery.⁶

The present community dates from the early eighteenth century, from the time that Gibraltar was ceded by Spain to Britain under the Treaty of Utrecht. Most of the families who settled on the Rock are mentioned in a census carried out by the British authorities in 1777, wherein they are described as hailing from Tetuán and other towns in Northern Morocco, although plenty of the inhabitants at the time were already listed as having been born in Gibraltar. Other Jews came from Lisbon, London, and Leghorn. I am referring, therefore, to a community that has been removed from the main centres of *Ḥaketía* for some 250 years.

Speech

Gibraltar is a bi-lingual community where English and an Andalusian variety of Spanish are used in everyday speech, these tongues functioning as languages in contact with all the code-switching normally found in such cases.⁷ It should be noted in passing that with the closure of the frontier with Spain in the early sixties, the importation of a Moroccan labour force to replace the Spanish one has meant that these immigrants speak Moroccan Arabic amongst themselves. The impact of Moroccan

5 See Manuel Miquez Núñez and José L. Martínez López, *Ceuta también es Sefarad*, Ceuta, 1976, pp. 96-97.

6 The speech of Gibraltar’s inhabitants has been studied by John M. Lipsky in an article entitled “Sobre el bilinguismo anglo-hispánico en Gibraltar”, *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 87.3 (1986), pp. 414-427.

7 José Benoliel *Dialecto judeo-hispano-marroquí o Haketía* (above note 3).

Arabic on the speech of native Gibraltarians has been imperceptible, however, and, as to be expected, it is the immigrants themselves who have sought to learn English and Spanish. In fact, although Morocco is geographically close, with respect to language and culture, the Straits of Gibraltar have proven over the centuries as impenetrable and distancing a frontier as the Pyrenees between Spain and France.

I have selected a number of idioms which form an integral part of the speech of the Jews of Gibraltar, a Jewish community whose Jewish speech patterns have not yet been studied to date, to the best of my knowledge. Benoliel collected these idioms in his description of *Ḥaketía* in the thirties, suggesting that they form part of the ‘dialecto hispano marroquí’ spoken by the Jews of northern Morocco, a dialect which stood in contradistinction to the languages of the area: Moroccan Arabic and the Spanish re-introduced by the Spanish colonizers.⁸

The small number of idioms I have selected to illustrate this paper (many more are in use) form part of the everyday speech of Gibraltar Jews when talking among themselves. As I mentioned earlier, they are never used when conversing with a non-Jew; the consciousness of group identity remains strong.

Some of these idioms deriving from *Ḥaketía* (all of them appear in Benoliel’s book) loosely translate a Hebrew idiom. An example is *mejorado tu*, which renders the Hebrew בקרוב אצלך [*be-qarov etzlekha*] and literally translated means “bettered or improved in your case”. It is interesting to compare this expression with one used by English Jews: “please G-d by you”. The phrase may be addressed to a single person at a wedding with the intention of wishing that s/he may be married soon. As with the expression derived from *Ḥaketía*, which is composed of Spanish lexemes, the parallel English expression is similarly formed from English lexemes: neither expression conveys much significance to non-Jewish native speakers of Spanish or English.

A number of *Ḥaketía* words of Arabic origin used by the Jews of Gibraltar amongst themselves obviously exist, Benoliel registering most of them in his study. Here are some verbs in common use today: *jantearse*, (‘to grow tired of’), *shalarse* (‘to feel great pleasure’), *aynear* (‘to look at/scrutinize’), *jadear* (‘to finish with’), *shinfearse* (‘to feel repulsion’). This feature of the speech of Gibraltar Jews cannot be taken as evidence of direct contact with Arabic, however. Such usages are inherited words from a time when *Ḥaketía* had greater currency among the inhabitants. Benoliel’s

8 Manolo Cavilla, *Diccionario Yanito*, Mediterranean Sun Publishing, Gibraltar 1978.

study contains numerous examples of the forms which exist in Ḥaketía as a result of Spanish contact with Arabic. The Ḥaketía lexemes of Arabic origin I have just quoted are used with much the same frequency as Yiddish words are used by Ashkenazi Jews who no longer speak Yiddish but preserve a few words in their lexicon. It is the foreign sound of these words which has buttressed their supposed “expressibility” – that is to say, a feeling that a person’s everyday language fails to express adequately what is meant. Furthermore, they are often used in humorous contexts.

Curiously, only the words of Ḥaketía which have an Arabic origin have entered the lexicon of Gibraltarian speech, as employed by Jews and non-Jews alike. It should be noted that the words/idioms included are those which are made up solely of Spanish words: *sajen*, meaning “the other”, is one of the words registered in the dictionary (but not *sajena*, which occurs in everyday Jewish speech with the general meaning of ‘a non-Jewish woman’ and pejoratively as ‘a non-Jewish girlfriend or mistress’), while *wajlot*, ‘problems/difficulties’, and *aynear*, ‘to look at/ scrutinize’, are also listed in the dictionary composed by Manuel Cavilla, a non-Jew.⁹

With regard to pronunciation, none of the archaic features of Old Spanish are audible in the speech of Gibraltar Jews. The sibilants, for example, are rendered as they are in the Andalusian variety of Spanish spoken on the Rock. The word for ‘empty/hollow’ in Castilian, *va[θ]ío*, is pronounced – as expected within such an area of ‘seseo’ as is Gibraltar – as *va[s]ío*. The word pronounced as in Ḥaketía, *va[zz]ío*, is found only in one context. The expression observes the ignorance of an individual: *vazzío como un shofar* – ‘as hollow as a shofar’.

Of greater interest to this paper are the idioms composed of Spanish words (lexemes), all registered in Benoliel, which continue to be used among the Jews of Gibraltar, demonstrating a sort of linguistic resilience of a Jewish language vis-à-vis the Spanish of their everyday speech. Speakers have succeeded in transmitting these idioms from one generation to the next over a period of time, while, for the most part, they remain incomprehensible to native Spanish speakers. One example illustrates the

9 There are noticeable changes in the patterns of Gibraltar speech as a whole, and in the Jewish community in particular. Up to the post-war generation, speakers were comfortable in both English and Spanish. New generations of Gibraltarians are tending to give prevalence to English as the language for everyday transactions and relegating Spanish to a passive role. It would be interesting to investigate whether the Ḥaketía idioms which have survived up until now will begin to disappear as speakers lose their fluency in Spanish.

point well: the Spanish for ‘good luck’ is *enhorabuena*. Gibraltar Jews continue to use the greeting *en buena hora* in preference to the Spanish word order.

In the examples below, I identify two areas of speech in which the idioms are commonly used. Although all of these are contained in the list provided by Benoliel in his survey of *Haketía* in the 1930’s, the curious fact here is that the idioms – composed as they are of Spanish words and capable of being expressed in the variety of terms Spanish Jews use as their everyday speech, albeit periphrastically – are rather retained in the manner in which they appear in *Haketía*.

Idioms composed of Spanish words expressing good wishes

Muchos (años) y buenos – (‘I wish you) a long and happy life’.

Alumbrado lo vivas – ‘may you live your life (bathed) in light’.

Tu boca en el cielo – lit. ‘your mouth in heaven’ = may heaven’s wish be echoed in your words.

Con bien veas su cara – lit. ‘with good may you see his/her face’ = may you see him/her again soon and in a happy hour.

En hartura lo tengas/áis siempre – (misled by the confusion of liquids, the informant thought he was saying *en altura*) ‘May you always have it in plenty – may you always be blessed with plenty’ (pronounced by a guest at a meal to the host upon leaving).

No sea su falta – ‘his absence should not be noticed’ (said after mentioning the name of someone not present).

Lo bueno mío – lit. ‘my good’ = my dear.

Se te reciba – pronounced at the conclusion of a fast as a good wish that the person’s effort may be received favourably by G-d.

Buenas salidas (de pascua) – lit. ‘good exit from a festival’ (a good wish at the conclusion of a festival).

Con bien nos deje = ‘may the festival leave us in good health’.

Fiestas y alegrías = ‘(may you have) festivities and joy’.

Idioms associated with illness and death

El dio/dios te escape de todo lo malo = ‘may G-d deliver you from all evil’.

Pasado sea el mal = ‘may all past ills be forgotten’.

Ferrazmal + someone’s name = to wish that the person named should be free from any illness or illfortune.

El descansado de + name = reference to a deceased person.

En buen mundo esté – lit. ‘may he be in a good world’ = to refer to a deceased person.

Dejó vida larga – lit. ‘s/he left a long life’ = a reference to someone who has recently died.

These are a few examples of idioms made up wholly of Spanish words. Many more are to be found in Benoliel’s book.

Conclusion

Where does this enquiry take us in considering “resilience” as a feature of Jewish languages? As pointed out above, I have often heard Hebrew speakers in Israel who know some words of Yiddish say that they resort to that tongue because of its “expressibility”, feeling their co-territorial language somehow not up to the task of capturing the exact shade of meaning of what they wish to express. In the case of Ashkenazi Jews who employ Yiddish idioms, they do so because no language related to Yiddish forms part of the language they use in their everyday lives. The same holds true for Ashkenazi speakers of English, American, or Latin-American Spanish.

The idioms found in the speech of the Jews of Gibraltar, however, some of which are listed above, constitute a different case. Despite the disappearance of *Ḥaketía* as a spoken language from the entire area – primarily due to the renewed impact of Modern Spanish in its Andalusian variety – these idioms and expressions, composed of purely Spanish words, continue to be used by a community of Jewish speakers.

To reiterate: what is curious in the case of these surviving idioms in the speech of Gibraltar Jews is that they persist – even when the speakers themselves are fluent in Spanish and might have found either direct or periphrastic ways of expressing these idioms in the Spanish many of them would have had as their first language up to a couple of generations ago, or as part of their bilingualism audible today.¹⁰ It is to this

10 A study of the usage/survival of *Ḥaketía* idioms among the Jews who settled in Madrid in the late 1950’s would add an interesting dimension to the question of “linguistic resistance”. The everyday speech of this community is Castillian, their children also studying in schools where the main language of instruction is Castillian. How many of the idioms still heard and employed by the Jews of Gibraltar are present in the speech of both older and

Life after Death

persistence or resilience of a Jewish language that I refer to in the quasi-apocalyptic title to this paper: life after death.

What Ḥaketía (and Ḥaketía is not an isolated case) as a Jewish language demonstrates is a resistance to extinction, even after most of the Jewish communities where the language traditionally held common currency have all but disappeared and their inhabitants emigrated to distant countries.

younger generations of Madrid Jews of Moroccan origin is a question worthy of further investigation.