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A Minority's Minority: An Ethnographic Study of Sephardic Jewish Community in Atlanta

Cover Page Footnote

IRB Approval Discussed with Dr. Sarah Cook and deemed to be exempt from IRB process.

Ethnographic Study of Sephardic Jewish Community in Atlanta

Introduction:

The main focus of this ethnography is the Sephardic Jewish Community in the greater Atlanta area, mostly concentrated inside Interstate 285, henceforth known as “the perimeter” throughout the paper. This investigation includes insights into the relation between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews in the context of the American South, guiding values of the community, as well as the linguistic landscape of their community with relationship to their heritage. In this study, I contrast the beliefs and practices of the Sephardic community in Atlanta with those reported in literature of the Ashkenazi community in general, specifically their unique religious practices, intracommunity relations, and linguistic differences.

Target Micro-Culture:

The Sephardic Jewish community is the second of the two main ethnic groups comprising the larger world-wide Jewish community. *Sephardim*, Jews of Sephardic origin, inhabited the Iberian Peninsula from the first century CE and continued to thrive until the Middle Ages (Sitton, 1985). From the year 700, they found themselves under somewhat tolerant Muslim rule throughout the peninsula, until their expulsion from Spain by the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel in 1492, after the Reconquista of Christian lands (Hualde, 2010). The Alhambra Decree issued by the Catholic Monarchs stated that all Jews, and Muslims, still

residing in the kingdom would be forced to convert to Catholicism (Azevedo, 2008). They were then cast into a diaspora even more sparsely concentrated than that of the Jewish community in general, and around 100,000 Jews fled the kingdom instead of converting to Catholicism (Pérez, Hochroth, & Nader, 2007).

The Jews that left Spain, and Portugal at a later date, found new homes in Northern Africa, Eastern Europe, and various locations around the Mediterranean (Penny, 2000). Because of their lack of communication with the rest of the Jewish population, mainly located in Western Europe and the Middle East at the time, they developed a separate and distinct identity than their Ashkenazi counterparts (Zohar, 2005). The communities in Atlanta that I will be observing are therefore descendants of those same Jews who fled Spain and set up minority communities elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

In contrast to the Sephardic community, it is essential to have a working knowledge of who [the Ashkenazim] are in relation to the Sephardim. Ashkenazi, according to prevailing scholarly literature, are Jews who formed communities in the Holy Roman Empire during the late first millennium and moved towards the modern-day Poland and Russia during the Middle Ages due to anti-Semitic pressures. Like the Sephardim, they mixed the language of their environs over time to create a new Jewish language, *e.g.*, Ladino from the mixture of medieval Spanish and Hebrew and Yiddish by combining elements of German, Slavic languages, and Hebrew. The Ashkenazim found themselves in hostile religious environments almost wherever they went culminating in suffering the bulk of the effects of the Holocaust in the Twentieth Century (Mosk, 2015).

The main informant that I contacted to be a part of my research is Rabbi Berger (a pseudonym) from a Sephardic temple in Atlanta. Two supplementary informants that I contacted

but have not heard back from are two married rabbis from Latin America that lead an Ashkenazi congregation. I feel like it would have been beneficial to have various rabbis be the informants for this research because they are likely to be the most knowledgeable about their communities due to their extensive studies. Along with their leadership roles in their communities, they are also normally required to be able to relate to other people and express their beliefs in an understandable way. The most difficult part of finding informants has been getting them to reply in a timely manner and having a set meeting, especially with the Spanish-speaking Ashkenazi rabbis that I was never able to meet with to have an interview.

Motivation, Personal Biases, and Prior Contact:

Prior to this series of research, I have had no contact with the Sephardic Community in Atlanta, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. I was raised in a Protestant family in the western suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia where I had little to no contact with Jews of any background until I had graduated from high school. However, after coming to college, I discovered past family connections to Judaism as well as making several Jewish acquaintances and friends. Because of those relationships and new familial knowledge, I began to develop an increasing interest in the Jewish people. The ideas of family and group unity and their increasingly long and detailed collective consciousness were all intriguing aspects that my own home culture lacked and lends itself to research for those outside the group.

The idea to study Sephardim in particular along with their culture came through my other area of study, Spanish. Being one of the varieties often classified under the umbrella term of Spanish, Judeo-Spanish is the language that the Sephardi Jews took with them when they were

exiled from Spain, which they still keep alive to an extent today. It was clear at the time of my first exposure to the culture and language that the Sephardic Jews were in an extreme minority in the world and even one in the larger Jewish community. Therefore, when a micro-culture needed to be chosen for this research project during the Communication Across Cultures class in the Applied Linguistics department at Georgia State University, the Sephardic community in Atlanta seemed to be an obvious choice. Not only are Sephardim a slim portion in the wider scope of Jewry; but, in the southern United States, all Jews are in a very obvious minority group.

I believed it to be important to study a minority group because I thought that they would have a stronger sense of community than a larger group. When I came to this conclusion, I had no anthropological basis for those claims, which could be seen as a form of bias that I hold in relation to all minority groups. It appears as though I have attributed the ideals of a strong community presence and loyalty to all minority groups, which is not necessarily true but it seems to be the case throughout various ethnic minority groups that I have become aware of, e.g., the Roma people, the Jewish people, the Ainu people, etc.

Due to my lack of previous involvement with the community outside of academia, I do not currently believe that I have any negative biases around the micro-culture. However, because I have such a lack of those existing negative biases, it is possible that I have some underlying positive notions that have yet to present themselves. For sources for this research endeavor, I attempted to avoid and be conscious of possible biases and to take a culturally relative approach since I did not learn any overtly anti-Semitic ideas during my upbringing.

Since I have relatively little contact with the group and no real evident biases at this time to skew my perception of the target culture, the worldview that I have as a member of their out-group is most likely to affect my experiences during the investigation. Seeing as I am technically

not a part of any Jewish congregation and I know very little about the culture in general, I am likely to be viewed as part of their out-group because historically Gentiles have not been kind to Jews. Nevertheless, I will attempt to observe them with all of my previous experiences in mind so that I am more aware of why I view certain aspects of their culture in a different light.

As just mentioned, it is an important part of ethnography to be aware of one's personal experiences and how that affects the way one perceives the world. This is necessary to be able to take seemingly negative feelings and understand why one would feel that way towards an action or culture based on the way one's own culture has conditioned them to behave. The same is true about positive sentiments towards parts of a culture. In an ethnographic study such as this, the researcher needs to be consciously aware of their lenses so as to strive for the most neutral presentation of the culture possible.

Methodology:

The methods used in this research were that of a standard ethnographic study, i.e., interviews, transcriptions of those interviews, observations, field notes, and reflections on what has been heard and seen in existing literature. The following will give an explicit outline as to how the study was carried out, with whom, for how much time, and how it will be presented in this research endeavor.

I contacted the rabbi at a local Sephardic Temple in one of the northern neighborhoods of Atlanta. He has agreed to be my primary informant. I interviewed him and used [rev.com](https://www.rev.com)'s transcription service to transcribe the interaction that I had with him in order to have a clearer understanding of what is currently happening in their community. With those transcriptions, it

has been easier to draw specific themes from the conversations that we had and visually present them through taxonomies.

Figure 1.1

(Open-Ended Interview) Basic Interview Questions:

- ❖ What is your role and title in the congregation?
- ❖ How old is this congregation in Atlanta?
- ❖ How would you say that the Ashkenazim and Sephardim interact with one another in the context of our city?
- ❖ Due to the lack of people who speak Judeo-Spanish, how do you account for it continuing to be used for so long?
- ❖ How many people of this congregation regularly use Judeo-Spanish/Ladino in their day-to-day lives?
- ❖ Are most people here first-generation or have their families been in the US or Atlanta in particular for a while?
- ❖ How would your services be different if they were conducted in a language other than Hebrew?

During the interview with the rabbi, it was also important for him to create a type of ethnoscientific model with terms which pertain to the Jewish faith and the beliefs that he holds so as to create a type of self-producing taxonomy. The goal here is to determine how the rabbi sees how his variety of “Jewishness” coincides with those items, thus creating a type of ethnoscientific model. The prompt that I gave him to create the model with was the following: “How would you create a hierarchy within the Jewish community and yours in particular?” This question is designed to elicit a response that would give a clearly constructed ethnoscientific model and how it is set up. An example of the model is attached below in *Figure 2.2* along with the prompt that I gave to him. The response that was given to the following prompt will be presented in the Results and Discussion section of the paper.

Figure 1.2

Create a similar diagram, even using words, with your idea of the Jewish hierarchy.

Aside from the direct interviews and their transcriptions, the observation of the congregation is also relevant to the overall understanding of the culture because it is where the majority of the tacit culture exchange takes place. The communication that takes place between members of the community without obstacles, even within the context of often regularized ritual worship, are insights into the way in which they perceive themselves and others inside their group.

At least three separate thirty minute observations of the target culture along with at least one interview with each set of rabbis from each temple to get adequate information from them was the ideal goal for the gathering of research. However, due to complications that will be discussed later in the paper, only the Sephardic Rabbi was able to be interviewed and only two observations, one an online recording and one Friday night Shabbat service, were able to be

completed. Consequently, the methodology in this study has had various drawbacks and areas for improvement in future studies that will be discussed in the conclusions section of the paper.

Hypothesis:

With regard to the differences between the Ashkenazi Jews and the Sephardim in Atlanta, I hold that they will have very few differentiating characteristics other than their linguistic and culinary heritage. However, any slight differences in values that have arisen over the centuries due to separation and different political and religious climates that can be readily detected by knowledgeable members of the community should be counted as pertinent. This is due to the continued adherence to dogma and tradition over the centuries by Jewish people of all traditions; henceforth, any area of difference is substantial and significant.

Results and Discussion:

Core Jewish Values – Belief in *G-d*

In this abbreviated ethnographic study, I was exposed to and explicitly told several of the core values that permeate all Jewish belief, not just the Sephardic community. However, because the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities come from different cultural heritages aside from their shared Judaism, their core beliefs differ slightly as I discovered throughout the course of my observations, interview, and literature review. Through the observations and the interview, it was made clear that the ideals surrounding their language, community, and rituals are still relevant to a significant portion of the Sephardic community.

After conducting some preliminary literature review, it is clear that not all Jewish people look at G-d in the same way, or even believe that He is an active force in the world today.¹ However, the people and events that are in the world today help to constitute the beliefs surrounding what is important to all Jews throughout the world. The Jewish identity, which I come to know through this search, is concentrated around the family, the community (a type of larger family), and a larger religious language that binds them together. With having these larger themes that connect Jews from all walks of life in different countries throughout the *Galut* (Hebrew term for 'diaspora,' lit. *exile*), as well as their unwavering support of the state of Israel, they are a strengthened community through these values.

However, as will be discussed later throughout the paper, some of the beliefs that Sephardic Jews hold, specifically their specific religious practices, geographic origins, and linguistic heritage, differentiate them from their Ashkenazi counterparts. This in the past has created some conflict between the groups as related to me by Rabbi Berger, and it is important to understand what exactly transpires in the Sephardic community and how that may be pertinent to those past conflicts.

The aforementioned conflicts only recently came to the forefront of the Jewish community in the last century, when the two groups became into contact in large numbers in Israel. Before the resettlement of Jews in the Middle East, what is now the state of Israel, they were largely not in contact with one another after their separation into the two groups (Zohar, 2005). Rabbi Berger mentioned these conflicts between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim when I asked him about the nature of the relationship between the two sects of Judaism today.

¹ In Orthodox and Traditional Jewish belief, the name for their deity YHWH is never to be pronounced or spelled fully, this tradition carries over by Jews when writing His name in English (Moss, n.d.)

Evidently, their past conflicts are still fresh on the minds of, at the very least, learned Jewish scholars if they are continuing being mentioned decades later, but then followed up with that they are on better terms. Their main conflicts have died out in recent years due to an attempt to preserve the Jewish people as a whole, allowing *intramarriage*, a marriage between two different sects of Judaism, contrasted with intermarriage where one is non-Jewish, so as to continue having familial units where both spouses are of Jewish descent.

Figure 2.1

The above figure is the hierarchical structure that was explained to me by Rabbi Berger when I presented him with the idea and prompt of the ethno-scientific model of how the hierarchy of importance presents itself in the Jewish context. Rabbi Berger placed G-d at the top of all guiding Jewish principles, which coincides with their observances of the Sabbath (Hebrew:

Shabbat), dietary restrictions (Hebrew: *Kashrut*), and ritual religious practices. This guiding belief in G-d is underpinned by what was explained to me as a compulsive need for study, a strong support for the people and state of Israel, and *Tikkun Olam* – Hebrew for betterment of the world.

Core Jewish Belief – Study

One of the core beliefs that Rabbi Berger elaborated upon during our interview is that of the necessity of study. The ideals of study come from the understanding of the laws written in the Torah. It was stated that the two most important *mitzvot* – commandments, are to be happy and to study. This theme of study and happiness is recurrent throughout the interview that I had with Rabbi Berger and the two observations that were made of the Sephardic community. The following taxonomy visually shows the importance and items relating to the ideal of study as I understood them based on my experiences with the community.

Figure 2.2

Throughout my observations of the Sephardic temple, I noted the emphasis that was placed on the Torah and its place in the community. During one of my observations, a broadcast of the temple's Torah dedication, the new copy of the text that they were receiving was given the utmost importance. For example, people kissed their hands after having touched the holy text, which was a striking element to me as it is not part of a religious culture to which I belong. The ideal of studying the Torah, as well as the subthemes that permeate the study of it, were at the forefront of the observations that I made. Several references to passages in the Torah were made throughout my observations. Along with that, the majority of the service that I observed in person, was conducted in Hebrew, a language that is at the core of the Torah and a subject that will be discussed in more detail in the language section of this paper.

Along with studying to become a better and more learned person, the *mitzvah* – singular of *mitzvot*, to study also applies to a Jew's ability to partake in *Tikkun Olam*. This phrase is Hebrew for 'betterment of the world' and has come to mean more to Jews of all backgrounds, whether religious or not. Aside from my observations of the temple community, I also looked at the congregation's website and it was apparent that the idea of bettering the world is an integral part of who they are as a community. There were several links to ways in which members of the congregation can join activism and community outreach programs through the temple itself. Rabbi Berger explained to me, and it is also present in the sources that have been utilized, that this is because it stems itself from one of the two great *mitzvot*.

All of these subthemes from the Torah study also lead into what can only be described as success. The larger Jewish community, despite facing so many hardships due to their identities, are often described as successful. Rabbi Berger in our interview expounds upon that notion and states that the Jewish people have done very well for themselves for the most part because of this

dedication to studying. Rabbi Berger pointed out to me that a prominent stereotype of Jews is often that “we [Jews] are successful to a fault” in all aspects of life. However, like most stereotypes, there is a form of truth inside of it. Like it has been explained and exhibited throughout all of my interactions with this community, the importance of being successful is paramount.

Core Jewish Belief – The State of Israel

The belief in the state of Israel is a common belief among all Jews regardless of religiousness or linguistic or ethnic background. Rabbi Berger puts the support of the state of Israel in his ethnoscientific model of importance within the overall Jewish community. Since its founding in 1948, the drive of Zionism – extreme support of a Jewish state in the Middle East, has grown exponentially. It was interesting, however, to notice that Rabbi Berger did not know the exact date that Israel officially became a nation in today’s society, even though there is a holiday celebrated in Judaism commemorating its creation, *Yom Ha’atzmaut*. This combining element of Judaism seems to be as much of a part of Sephardic Judaism as any other sect because it is so widely celebrated by Jews of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Belief Comparison with Ashkenazim

During the same interview, it was stated to me that an Ashkenazi rabbi would almost certainly respond to my question in the same manner that he did; albeit, probably jokingly adding in some Yiddish terms in their explanation. This prompted an internal personal response to the hypothesis that I had come up with, before the start of data collection, that the two factions of Judaism that I was comparing were not distinct from one another in their core belief system.

However, this accord of beliefs between the groups could easily change if a Reformed or Reconstructionist Ashkenazi were to be interviewed and then contrasted with those of Rabbi Berger. Because the majority of religious Sephardim follow traditional practices, they would likely have at least a few differences in their core beliefs due to how much Reformed and Reconstructionist Ashkenazi have shifted their priorities towards that of humanism and social betterment and away from staunch religious practices (Lui, 2013).

Language Use

One of the most highlighted aspects of Sephardic culture, and Jewish culture in general, as relayed to me by Rabbi Berger during our interview and throughout all of the sources that have been used for this research, is the importance of the language that is used. Whether it be for religious purposes, speaking to family older family members, or maintaining community ties, the usage of heritage and religious languages has special significance to the Jewish people. In particular, the Sephardic culture has ties to two homelands that have shaped their linguistic identity as a people.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in Spain under somewhat tolerant rule until the fifteenth century, the Sephardim have created a lasting attachment to Spain and the Spanish language through *Ladino*. As defined previously, Ladino is the variety of the Spanish language spoken by descendants of the Jews who fled Spain due to pressures from the Catholic Monarchs in or around the year 1492. This variety of Spanish, while retaining elements of medieval Spanish, such as phonological rules and lexical items, it also adds in elements of Hebrew largely having to do with language and religion. To quote Rabbi Berger, “Spain is also our mother country, we have two mothers. Spain and Israel”.

In contrast to the similarities in beliefs between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim, their linguistic background and their relationship to their linguistic heritages differ greatly. Rabbi Berger states that the Sephardim throughout their history, even after their expulsion from Spain, were found in relatively tolerant and accepting environments. It was due to this acceptance that they were not found to be living in ghettos throughout their history or normally subjugated to sanctions like their Ashkenazi brethren. Because of these differences in their collective cultural consciousness having to do with their superstrate languages (languages that hold higher prestige in relation to the other languages in use, e.g. French instead of Kreyol) they have evidently developed different attitudes towards those languages.

Whereas the Ashkenazi population was much larger in terms of numbers, they found themselves in societies that were highly anti-Semitic and did not contribute to a cohesive living or learning situation. Therefore, their language heritage did not evolve in the same way that the Sephardim's did. According to what I saw during my observations and what Rabbi Berger relayed to me, the Sephardim use the few times that they speak Ladino to "echar lashon" – to throw language, chat, or to talk about food items that their families have been making for generations. This is in stark contrast to the relationship that the Ashkenazim have with Yiddish.

Up until the Holocaust, there were around 10,000,000 speakers of Yiddish, and in contrast, there were less than one million Ladino speakers (Mosk, 2015). This is due to a multifold difference in the societies that they lived in. Because the Ashkenazim were mostly confined to Jewish ghettos in the cities that they resided in, they were forcibly more connected with one another and their own language than the Sephardim. I posed the question to Rabbi Berger of whether this contributed to the Ashkenazim having a stronger sense of family or *mishpuchah* in Yiddish. He agreed that the environments that they were in contributed greatly to

the way in which they interacted with one another and most likely created that deep sense of family ties and loyalty to their language, signaling their Jewishness in a way that the Sephardim did not.

Aside from the Hebrew-derived languages that they use, both the Ashkenazim and Sephardim make use of Hebrew in their liturgical traditions and prayers. Almost all of the Shabbat service that I observed was conducted in Hebrew. I understood almost nothing that was said during the service and I was surprised that more of it was not conducted in Ladino. Rabbi Berger explained that this is to create a stronger bond with the other Jewish communities throughout the world. He stated that if the services were to be conducted in Ladino or English, they would begin to differentiate themselves further from the rest of the Jewish population, which is not their goal.

Conclusion:

Throughout the course of writing this ethnography, I encountered a culture that was based on community participation, language appreciation, and study. Their linguistic heritage may not be able to maintain Ladino and keep it from further becoming a moribund language or even keep it from going extinct; however, it will continue to be important to them in the areas that they currently use it in: food, chatting, and occasionally in religious services. In contrast, Hebrew has continued to be their most important religious language that binds them all together.

In response to the hypothesis that was created at the beginning of this research undertaking, I believe that it is a valid understanding of how the two groups exist in relation to one another. They have very few differences other than their linguistic heritage and culinary

practices. However, they are still connected linguistically by their usage of Hebrew as a religious language.

The research methods that I used to conduct this ethnography had several flaws that could not be avoided due to the time frame in which the study needed to be completed. I learned from this project that finding informants with ample time to have several interviews and observe the communities was difficult, and I was not able to conduct multiple interviews or observations for this project. Also, inclusion of more scholarly works pertaining to the Sephardim would have been a beneficial addition through the way of a literature review. I plan on researching various Judeo-based languages as well as the history of minority language documentation and evolution in my graduate course of study in theoretical linguistics.

In sum, this ethnography on the micro-culture of Sephardic Jews, specifically in the Atlanta area, helps to give a greater understanding of the make-up of culture itself as well as the specific inter-workings of this specific culture. This study has inspired me to continue to study and hopefully help to preserve the Ladino variety of the Spanish language and find ways in which to keep it from going extinct while keeping all of that cultural knowledge alive.

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