

Faculty Research Grant Proposal for Summer 2008

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Oral Tradition and Folklore of the Sephardic Jewish Community in the Greater Chicago area

I. Project Summary

Summary: This project seeks to compile examples of Sephardic Jewish folklore conveyed by informants living in the Chicago area.

Abstract: A *Sephardi* is a Jew whose ancestry can be traced back to the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). These people are descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain by order of the Catholic Monarchs in 1492 and from Portugal by order of King Manuel I in 1497. Following their forced exile from these countries, these particular Jews settled into three distinct geographical areas. One large group went to live within the Ottoman Empire (modern day Turkey and Greece), another group went to North Africa and the third group actually stayed behind in the Iberian peninsula, living as new converts to Christianity (*conversos*). A number of people from this last group later reverted to Judaism and finally left Spain, settling in countries such as Italy, the Netherlands, England and in several countries of the American continent. Of the approximately five and a half million Jews currently living in the USA, about 300,000 consider themselves Sephardic. There are several thousand Sephardic Jews living in the greater Chicago area including the Northern suburbs of Evanston and Skokie. The American Sephardic Federation (an organization representing Sephardic congregations in the Midwest) is located in Evanston and in the area there are also several congregations and community kollels. A kollel is an institute for studies of the Talmud and rabbinic literature (see Appendix One for a list of congregations and kollels).

My proposal is to conduct field work on these Sephardic congregations with the intention of gathering material pertaining to their oral traditions. Specifically, I am interested in compiling examples of *romances* (ballads), songs (used in weddings and

childbirth), hymns and chants. The interviews will be digitally recorded and the texts will be transcribed. The material compiled will be organized according to genre, theme or motif, name, age and origin of the informant and other standard criteria used in folkloric studies. Once the material is organized, it will be preserved and placed in the A.C Buehler library for the benefit of the Elmhurst College Community where faculty and students will be able to make use of it. I plan to study the material in detail with the intention of shedding light on the current state of Sephardic folklore in the Chicago area. I anticipate that I will be able to write an article describing the method used in the field work interviews as well as the material compiled. It is very likely that I will be able to present this information at a national or international conference since I am already a member of several organizations that welcome this type of research.. Depending on the quantity and quality of the examples collected, I may be able to write another article studying the themes, motifs and language presented in the oral tradition of the Chicago Sephardic community. This study may be of comparative nature (analyzing the commonalities and divergences of this tradition in relation to that of the Sephardic Jews of North Africa and the Balkans).

II. Narrative

1. Current situation

The history and culture of the Sephardic Jews have been studied by scholars from such diverse disciplines as history, religion, music, folklore and anthropology. Walter P. Zenner, a professor of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Albany, compiled materials reflecting the customs and habits of the Sephardic Jews (specifically those with roots in Syria). In 1988, he investigated the Sephardic community in Chicago and conducted interviews with its members. He also published an article in the same year intended as an exploratory study of the Chicago Sephardim. His documents are now located at the American Sephardi Federation Center of Jewish History in New York City. Zenner was the last scholar to conduct significant field work research on the Sephardic community in Chicago. Other scholars, among them Hispanist Andrés Manuel Martín Durán, have conducted field work among the Sephardic communities in other cities in the

USA. Martín Durán was able to compile a significant amount of ballads and songs in New York during the 1960's. Paloma Díaz Más, a Spanish scholar of Sephardic descent, probably is the most famous and well regarded Hispanist interested in the Sephardic oral tradition. She has published numerous books and articles about the folklore of this community but her work focuses on the Sephardic communities of North Africa and the Balkans. Since Zenner's preliminary study of the Sephardic community in Chicago, there has not been another attempt by any scholar to explore the current situation of this population. I believe it is important at this time to conduct some new field work to re-evaluate the state of this community and to be able to preserve their legacy for the generations to come.

2. The Project Plan

The primary goals of this project are the preservation of folklore of an important community as well as the dissemination of knowledge of an underrepresented group. This project can be clearly linked to the Mission and goals of Elmhurst College as stated on the College website:

we want them [the students] to connect broadly across disciplinary boundaries and across the barriers that separate people because they have lived and learned in a diverse community, gained even broader perspectives by encountering other cultures in different places and times, explored interdisciplinary approaches to understanding, and thought carefully about the meaning and impact of their lives as citizens and professionals.

This project will allow students to gain a broader perspective on the culture, lives, history, religion and language of the Sephardic Jewish community. Students who enroll in my classes, specifically in my Spanish Culture and in my Spanish literature course will benefit tremendously from reading and hearing examples of the folklore of the Sephardic community that can be traced back to Medieval Spain. They will encounter a different culture that has survived for five centuries at different times and places but that still shares links with Sepharad (Spain), the mother country. I believe that by being exposed to the culture and folklore of the Sephardic community in Chicago, students will get to

appreciate more other underrepresented cultures and that the experience will spark interest in learning more about other communities.

The project also explores interdisciplinary approaches to understanding, it will offer students the possibility of exploring an area of study through different approaches such as music, religion, philosophy, language or folklore to name a few. I anticipate that the results of this investigation can open up possibilities for collaboration with colleagues in other departments that may lead to a team-taught course.

The Foreign Language Department will also benefit from this project since its findings will allow me to develop new courses such as a comparative class studying the different oral traditions in the Hispanic world, a class on the Sephardic tradition or a course on Hispanic balladry.

3. Faculty Expertise

My primary area of research is Hispanic Balladry (known in Spanish as *Romancero*). I have been studying the field of Hispanic oral tradition and folklore since I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Texas at Austin. My dissertation focused on the feminine voice in the *Romancero* tradition and the role of female informants in the dissemination and preservation of this genre. Since my graduation in 1999, I have published several articles and I have given numerous talks at national and international conferences pertaining to the *Romancero* tradition (see section VI). Even though I have never conducted field work before, I am familiar with the methods used in my field.

I am also familiar with the history, themes, motifs and main characteristics of the oral tradition in the Sephardic community as well as the linguistic and cultural influences the Sephardic community experienced during the years of the diaspora that shaped its oral traditions and made it different from the ones existing in Spain. Lastly, I am able to understand Ladino, the language used by the Sephardic Jews, since it is very similar to Old or Medieval Spanish which I studied as a graduate student.

4. Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination:

Success in this project will be measured mainly taking into account the following issues:

- a. Possibility of conducting oral interviews with informants who are members of the Sephardic community.
- b. Quantity and quality of the examples collected from the interviews.

Obviously, it is crucial for this project to be able to collect enough material so it can be preserved and subsequently disseminated through different means. If through the interviews I am able to find and collect ample evidence and examples of the rich cultural oral tradition of the Sephardic Jews, there will be many venues in which this material will be disseminated regionally as well as nationally. First of all, once classified, organized and digitally mastered, the material will be preserved at the library of Elmhurst College. During the Fall of 2008 and the Spring of 2009 I plan to organize talks, round-table discussions, forums and/or concerts showcasing the forms of folklore collected that will enable the Elmhurst College community to enjoy and appreciate the rich oral culture of the Sephardic community. Since these events may be of interest to other groups and organizations in campus, I plan to work organize the events with some of them so we can arrange for events that will bring more spectators to campus.

III. Time Line:

Field work will be carried out during the summer of 2008 (June-August). It is my intention to schedule the interviews with the informants during these months. During the Fall of 2008, I, together with a student worker, will classify, transcribe and organize the material. . In early Spring of 2009, provided that I have been able to collect enough material, I plan to organize events described above in campus to showcase the folklore.

IV. Budget

Faculty salary: \$2,800

Student Stipends: \$10 per hour x 50 hours = \$500

Supplies: (video tapes, folders, photocopies, etc) \$100

Travel and invitations to informants: \$100

V. Current or previous grants

None

VI. Publications

Publications that pertain to the topic of the proposal:

"The Feminine Voice in the *Romancero's* Modern Oral Tradition: Gender Differences in the Recitation of the Ballad *La bastarda y el segador*." *Folklore* 113 (2002): 183-196.

"Variaciones del tema clásico de Philomena y Progne en el romance Blancaflor y Filomena." *Lemir: revista electrónica de literatura española Medieval y del Renacimiento. Number VI.* (September 2002)

"Re-evaluación del mito de la mujer envenenadora en el romance *El veneno de Moriana*." *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval*: Santander, Spain, 2000.

Conferences that pertain to the topic of the proposal:

"*Urban Legends in Spain: Social Commentaries about Immigration.*" 2006 Popular Culture Association National Conference. Atlanta (Georgia) April 12-15,2006.

"*La aparición de la enamorada muerta: A ballad for two queens*". Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities. Honolulu (Hawaii) January 8-11, 2004.

"*¿Dónde vas Alfonso XII?: entre la historia y la leyenda.*" American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese eighty-fourth Annual Meeting. Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), July 29-August 2, 2002.

"La transformación del romance *Conde Antores* en el romance *La condesita*: el papel de la mujer en la tradición oral moderna." American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese Eighty-third Annual Meeting. San Francisco (California), July 5-9, 2001.

"*La infanta Parida* : un ejemplo del romancero como vehículo de expresión crítica." Midwest Modern Language Association. Kansas City (Kansas), November 2-6, 2000.

"Re-evaluación del mito de la mujer envenenadora en el romance *El veneno de Moriana*." VIII congreso de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval. Universidad Menéndez Pelayo, Santander (Spain), September 22-25, 1999.

"The Female Voice in *Romances*: Coded Messages." American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese Eighty-First Annual Meeting. Denver (Colorado), July 30-August 3, 1999.

"Coded Messages in the *Romancero*: The Case of *La mala hierba*." Texas Medieval Association, 7th Annual Conference. Trinity University, San Antonio (Texas), 17-19 September 1998.

APPENDIX ONE: LIST OF SEPHARDIC CONGREGATIONS AND KOLLELS

Congregations

Congregation Shaare Mizrah

773-465-5274
2919 W Devon Avenue
Chicago, IL 60659 FR,SH,K,H
Rabbi Daniel Raccah 773-761-2482
Email: shaaremizrah@sbcglobal.net

Sephardic Congregation

847-475-7707
1819 West Howard St Fax: 847-475-7067
Evanston, IL 60202 D,K,H
Rabbi Michael Azose 847-475-7707
Email: mazose@fsinet.net or sephardiccongregation@yahoo.com

American Sephardic Federation

Midwest Chapter
1819 W. Howard St.
Evanston, IL 60202
Phone: (847) 475-7707, (847) 677-5951
Fax: (847) 475-7067
Contact: Dr. Sol Hasson

Kollels

Sephardic Community Kollel
2949 W. Touhy Ave.
Chicago, IL 60645
Rosh Kollel Rabbi Daniel Raccah
(773) 465-5274