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Negotiating Afro-Jewish Identity in the Cabo Verdean Diaspora

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Abstract:
In this paper, I explore how diasporic Cabo Verdean-Americans with Jewish ancestry (especially those living in the New England region of the U.S.) experience their racially and spiritually mixed (and doubly or even triply stigmatized) identity. Being African in (racist) North America presents enormous challenges. Being Jewish in (increasingly anti-Semitic) North America presents different but somewhat parallel challenges. To account for unexpected identity crossings, I combine critical race theory with a Geertzian approach to understanding social worlds. In chronicling the experiences of Cape Verdeans who embrace divergent components of their multi-layered racial and spiritual heritage, I consider whether Cabo Verdeans might present an unexpected “model for” a multicultural/multiracial/multi-faith America.

Key words: Cabo Verdean diaspora; Afro-Jewish identity; Judaism; southeastern New England; critical race theory; interpretive anthropology.
Introductory Thoughts

For readers of this journal, it will, likely, be uncontroversial to observe that being African or Afro-descended in the contemporary United States presents enormous challenges. The nation’s historical foundations in racism via the near-genocide of the native population, the nefarious trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the building of the nation’s economy on some 2.5 centuries of enslaved labor, have combined to create a grim legacy that continues to cast a long shadow.

Being Jewish in contemporary America presents challenges that have different historical foundations but somewhat parallel experiential realities. Across different eras of U.S. history, anti-Semitism has erupted with varying levels of force. In the current era, anti-Jewish sentiment has risen sharply, with anti-Semitic incidents occurring in spaces ranging from synagogues and graveyards to street scenes and college campuses (Rosenblatt, 2020).

Moreover, although the U.S. famously refers to itself (if not entirely accurately, given the population of Native or First Nation peoples) as a “nation of immigrants,” the past decade has seen a surge in anti-immigrant sentiment, solidified in 2016 by the election of a president who opened his campaign with a xenophobic platform.

How do people living in America today experience these challenges in their everyday lives when they bear both subject positions of being Black and Jewish at once, whether as U.S.-born Americans or as immigrants? What motivates people to retain and embrace this combined subject position in the face of double discrimination? And, how might the answers to these questions illuminate social theory about race, religion, and identity as we understand these components of the human experience?

The lives of Cabo Verdeans in the U.S. offer compelling windows into a complex and somewhat unexpected ethno-religious identity that rewards attention. In this article, I endeavor to avoid over-generalizing by addressing the question of how some Cabo Verdeans have come to hold varying forms of an Afro-Jewish identity. I summarize and highlight here the findings of a long study I am developing in much greater detail elsewhere (Gottlieb, n.d.).

In trying both to account for their diverse experiences, and to see how those experiences might, in turn, speak to social theory, I will bring into conversation two theoretical approaches that normally inhabit distant corners of the scholarly world—critical race theory, and a slice of cultural anthropology known as interpretive anthropology, as developed by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. Critical race theory offers us essential insights into the racialized foundations of life around the globe in the past half-millenium, with a special emphasis on economic and political institutions playing out across historical eras. For its part, interpretive anthropology offers us theoretical and methodological tools for understanding how people and communities see and experience their daily life worlds. Braiding together these two perspectives may produce a rich understanding of complex subject positions occupied by contemporary Cabo Verdeans in New England who have Jewish heritage.

Cape Verdeans with Jewish Ancestry: Then

The obvious first question, however, takes us to origins. How do some contemporary Cape Verdeans come to have Jewish ancestry in the first place?

The history of relations between Jews and Africans south of the Sahara—heretofore, a
largely neglected topic—has just begun to attract significant attention in the past decade or so.¹

The Cape Verdean case occupies a special place in this historiography, for reasons I sketch
briefly here.

In precolonial times, early generations of sailors from both Africa and Europe had
discovered the Cape Verde islands. However, from everything scholars can learn from historical
and other records, the archipelago comprising ten islands off the coast of Senegal was devoid of
any enduring human population at the time that Portuguese sailors chanced upon it in the mid-
15th century.² Portugal immediately claimed these uninhabited Atlantic islands for their rapidly
growing empire and set about populating them. The first generations of occupants included
several categories of Portuguese (and some other Europeans). Among these were Iberian Jews,
as increasing anti-Semitism in both Portugal and Spain made the islands a viable option for some
Jews fleeing oppression.

Not quite 40 years after the islands’ rediscovery, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I
issued an Edict of Expulsion (a.k.a. the Alhambra Decree), expelling all Jews from their
territories (specifically, from Aragon and Castille) (see Plate 1). Soon

¹ A scholarly organization dedicated to the subject (International Society for the Study of African
Jewry) has now held four international conferences gathering both scholars and others for
stimulating talks, some of which have been published in edited collections (e.g., Brettschneider,
Bruder and LeRoux, 2019. Other recent books on Jews in/and Africa include: Brettschneider
(2015); Bruder (2008); Hull (2009); Lis, Miles, and Parfitt (2016); Mark and Horta (2011); and
Miles (2014).
² Early Phoenician sailors, as well as Lebou sailors from the nearby coast of Senegal, had
previously discovered the islands. However, no archaeological or other evidence yet exists that
would suggest any long period of continuous occupation.
afterward, Portugal’s King Manuel reluctantly followed suit, as a condition of marrying Ferdinand and Isabella’s daughter—without which marriage, he risked Spain invading Portugal.

Even if they converted to the state-mandated religion of Catholicism, Jews who remained in either of these Iberian nations would be subject to persecution. Church and state united in a legal institution that came to be known as the Inquisition. Trials by this body included multiple forms of extended torture, sometimes culminating in being burnt alive.

Following the expulsion edicts, and continuing over the next two centuries or so, Iberian Jews and their descendants escaped the multiple risks to their lives by seeking safe spaces around a globe whose maritime routes were dramatically expanding, partly thanks to new navigational technologies. These refugees were not a monolithic group. They included practicing Jews, as well as Jews who had converted to Catholicism to evade the punishment of the Inquisition. Called “New Christians” (or Cristãos novos), the latter group was, itself, heterogeneous, and included those who converted in all sincerity as well as those who converted in name only, to escape persecution. Jews and former Jews with all these varying identifications scattered around the world, where they became known as Sephardim, or Sephardic Jews—Jews from Sepharad, the ancient Roman-era Jewish name for the Iberian peninsula.
One of the earliest but, to date, least-known destinations of all these groups of refugee Jews was the newly-discovered Cape Verde archipelago. Along with other co-nationals who left their homeland for their own reasons, some Jews fleeing growing anti-Semitism in Portugal and Spain found their way to the islands of Cape Verde, which were attracting new populations. The early Jewish settlers engaged in a variety of economic activities—including linguistic translation, trade in small goods, administration, and banking. Some—probably a small minority—of these early Jewish and “New Christian” residents also engaged in the expanding traffic in humans.

In this outpost of the North Atlantic, Jewish refugees joined European Catholics and Africans (who, no doubt, included both animists and Muslims). Most of the Africans were kidnapped by Europeans (both Catholics and Jews) and brought as enslaved peoples from the mainland to the islands (while a much smaller number of West Africans arrived voluntarily, as traders). Although many of these enslaved Africans were further punished by being transported across lethal seas in the growing trans-Atlantic slave trade, some remained enslaved on the islands. There, they often had children with (and sometimes married) Europeans on the islands—again, both Catholics and Jews. Some of these unions linking African men and Europe must have been forced; others may have been at least somewhat consensual (keeping in mind the limited options to enslaved women). With complex relations ranging from love to violence (and sometimes both), these multiple groups in effect forged the first multi-faith, multi-racial population of the modern world, of the sort that some observers have dubbed “creole.”

For a discussion of the genetic evidence highlighting the likelihood that these unions linked African women and European men (and not the reverse), see Sandra Beleza et al. (2012), p. 2. The term is used widely among Cabo Verdeans in referring to their identity. Linguists sometimes balk at this usage, as the term has specific meanings in linguistics that do not translate seamlessly to contexts beyond language. For extensive conversations about this delicate issue, I am indebted to Fernanda Pratas, a linguist who specializes in the Cape Verdean language.
The multiply-mixed population by no means epitomized a utopia: divisions of race and class immediately obviated such a scenario. Indeed, the society that developed from these heterogenous groups quickly became socioeconomically and racially stratified, with lighter-skinned peoples occupying positions of greater wealth, authority, and freedom than their darker-skinned counterparts (Baleno, 2001; Carreira, 1983).

Power also exerted itself through religion. Back in Iberia, the increasingly powerful, Church- and state-sponsored Inquisition exceeded its home borders, permitting Catholicism as the only state-sponsored religion on the Atlantic islands. The colonial metropole sent spies from Lisbon to the islands to find any overtly practicing Jews; any secretly practicing Jews; and any “New Christians” who claimed to have converted fully to Catholicism but whom neighbors suspected of secretly remaining Jewish (Santos and Soares, 2001, pp. 485-488). The spies arrested some individuals and sent them back to Lisbon, to be tried for “heresy” in the Inquisition’s courts (Green 2007b).

“By the 17th century,” the historian Tobias Green writes, “the cristiãos novos [or ‘New Christians’] were the predominant European social group in Cabo Verde.” But despite their demographic position—or, perhaps, because of it—they found themselves unable to publicly practice any form of Judaism, nor claim any form of Jewish identity. What had lured them to chase their dream of a space of spiritual safety on remote islands of the Atlantic quickly revealed itself as yet another space of danger where it was impossible to maintain Jewish ritual practices.

Indeed, as remained the case in Iberia, “passing” as Christian proved a life-or-death challenge for former Jews in Cabo Verde. Those “New Christians” lucky enough to escape being denounced (by neighbors, co-workers, or others) to spies must surely have felt terrorized enough by the threat of denunciation that they would have felt motivated at least to conceal, if not entirely renounce, most Jewish practices, and keep up public appearances as practicing Christians. If they failed to maintain a fully convincing charade, the consequences could be drastic. Being denounced to the Inquisition might well have meant being sent back to Lisbon for endless interrogations--perhaps accompanied by torture, perhaps ending in murder by public burning.

Nevertheless, “passing” could only be partial, given the enforced label of Cristão novo (“New Christian”) that publicly marked their difference and rendered them perpetually vulnerable to denunciation, as long as the Inquisition remained a viable institution. Moreover, some Jews managed to clandestinely hold on to daily habits that would have felt comfortable from their prior lives (or those of their parents or grandparents) as practicing Jews. These included dietary restrictions, such as avoiding eating pork; and ritual practices such as lighting candles every Friday night to ritually welcome the beginning of the Sabbath, the weekly day of prayer and reflection dedicated to God, as marked by practicing Jews. The daily habits retained by some Cape Verdeans also included life-cycle practices such as adorning newborns with a bracelet or anklet containing a six-pointed star (sometimes called the “star of David” or, in Hebrew, “magen David”) (Pelaia, 2019). Other “New Christians” and their descendants continued to observe key Jewish funeral customs, such as covering mirrors; wrapping corpses only in flimsy shrouds, and/or placing them in simple wooden boxes rather than elaborate coffins; burying cadavers soon after death; and hosting mourning visitors for seven days (“sitting

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6 On the global reach of the Inquisition’s courts, and its inhumane, public burnings of people condemned to death (auto-da-fés), see Green (2007a).
Whether or not they engaged in all, some, or none of such traditional Jewish practices, many “New Christians” continued to intermarry among themselves across many generations. Others married “Old Christians,” while still others married Africans who had been forced by the Portuguese colonial rulers to convert to Christianity. By the time the Inquisition courts were formally disbanded as an institution in Iberia—in 1821 in Portugal, and in 1834 in Spain—their effects had become so pervasive that Cabo Verdean society had long become explicitly Catholic. Even so, a deep—if increasingly invisible—foundation in Judaism underlay this society, with its multi-faith origins. That historical foundation may well have remained evident to practicing Moroccan Jews who decided to emigrate to Cabo Verde after Portugal revoked the formal apparatus of the Inquisition.

Starting in the early 19th century and continuing into the early 20th century, large numbers of Jews left their hometowns in several cities of Morocco that contained large and lively Jewish communities. Fleeing persecution against Jews in Morocco that escalated through this period for a variety of reasons, these refugees found their way to several international destinations—among them, Cape Verde, where they added a fresh era of Jewish influences to local society. Considering these two “waves” of migration—the early stage from Portugal, followed by the later stage from Morocco—Jews have remained a significant, though largely hidden, part of the Cape Verden story ever since the islands became continually inhabited by humans. As the pre-eminent Cabo Verdean writer, Germano Almeida, once told me:

Well, all the Jews in Cabo Verde have died. But many, many Jews came to the islands and married Cabo Verdeans, and had children with Cabo Verdeans. So, although they’ve all died, they mixed with us, and they are part of us. What are the implications of this half-millenium of decisive but largely concealed Jewish influence for contemporary Cabo Verdeans both on and off the islands? How do Cabo Verdean-Americans with Jewish ancestry understand and negotiate their remarkably mixed religious heritage, and how does that intersect with their racially mixed identity?

Cape Verdeans with Jewish Ancestry: Now

The first observation to be made is that Cape Verdeans themselves hold a range of knowledge about the Jewish history of their islands and, indeed, of their own families. Most of those whose Jewish ancestry dates from the more recent Moroccan migration stream are aware of this ancestry, from oral history passed down in their families over the past century or so. On the islands, people who live near these families are, likewise, typically aware of the Jewish history of their neighbors. As it happens, much of the Moroccan Jewish migration stream ended up on one island in particular—Santa Antão—and virtually all residents of that island are aware of the Jewish presence surrounding them. A sign for the town named Sinagoga (“synagogue”) leaves

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7 On the “push factors” in Morocco throughout the 19th century that drove Jews to emigrate, see, for example, Schroeter, 1988, pp. 209-28; on the “pull factors” of Israel and France as destinations for large numbers of Moroccan Jewish refugees, see, respectively, Boum (2013, pp. 87-108) and Arkin (2014, pp. 43-55).
8 Conversation with Alma Gottlieb (Mindelo, São Vicente, Cabo Verde), April 4, 2007; translation from Portuguese into English by Alma Gottlieb.
no mistake about their historical presence.

Plate 3
*Sign for the town of Sinagoga, Santa Antão (photo by Richard Lobban)*

The first democratically elected prime minister of the newly independent nation, who governed from 1991-2001—Carlos Wahnon Veiga—happens to be the great-grandson of Isaac and Rachel Wahnon, Jews who migrated to Cabo Verde from Morocco in the 19th century. Carlos Wahnon Veiga’s public presence has, furthermore, brought wide recognition to the existence and role of Moroccan Jews in Cape Verde.\(^9\) One Cape

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\(^9\) Carlos Veiga is now a member of the opposition party, MpD (Movimento para a Democracia). He recently announced his retirement from his current position as Cape Verde’s ambassador to the U.N. in consideration of run for election as president in his home country (InforPress, 2019).
Verdean woman (“Marie”) now living in the U.S. told me:

I didn’t even know there were Jewish [people] in CV until 1990 [when she was in her mid-20s], when democracy came. The first democratically elected president was Carlos Veiga. He surprised everyone by saying he had Jewish ancestry. That was the first and only time I ever heard of Jewish [people] on Cape Verde.

In studying Marie’s genealogy, I thought it likely that she had early Jewish ancestors dating from the Inquisition, but, as with most such descendants, she was unaware of any possible connection. With Jewish or “New Christian” ancestors who became fully incorporated into the dominant Catholic ethos of the islands within a few generations of arriving on the islands many centuries ago, most descendants of those Jews currently remain unaware of that component of their distant ancestry.\(^\text{10}\)

How might such lack of awareness have been perpetuated? To avoid persecution in their new homeland, generations of Jewish parents must have felt compelled to raise generations of children with decreasing knowledge of their religious heritage. “Passing” as a Christian turned into living the life of a Christian. Within several generations, we might say, the deception became internalized.

\(^{10}\) In later generations, some of these former Jews abandoned the Catholic church and embraced new denominations of the Protestant church introduced into the islands.
As Luis Faria told me:
There are certain things [Jewish practices] that could have been a signal [of Jewish ancestry], but they weren’t talked about--it’s one of those things. Maybe the old ones [earliest Jewish ancestors on Cabo Verde] would not talk about certain things [Jewish practices] because of being afraid of being persecuted . . . so it just stayed taboo . . . the first ones [Jewish or “New Christian” migrants from Iberia] … [it’s] not that they didn’t know of these practices, but . . . if they exposed themselves, then they would run the risk of being persecuted.

Given the pressures--along with the length of the intervening time since events so distant from living memory—it becomes understandable why few living descendants of those early refugees identify today with their long-ago Jewish ancestors.

Yet, if many Cape Verdeans remain unaware of this component of their history, others are now finding themselves surprised, intrigued, and sometimes delighted, to discover this early stage in their families’ lives. Using the classic qualitative research methods of cultural anthropology, over the past fourteen years, I have been conducting fieldwork with hundreds of Cape Verdeans, both on and off the islands, who are now finding their way back to their Jewish origins. The epicenter of this group is in southeastern New England.

In Boston, a large community Seder celebrating the Jewish holiday of Passover has annually attracted some 200 people--half Cape Verdeans, half American Jews—

![Plate 5](image)

The annual community Passover Seder in Boston now attracts 200 people—by design, about half Cape Verdeans, half American Jews (photo by Alma Gottlieb)

for the past 14 years. Each Seder table typically accommodates five Cape Verdeans and five American Jews, seated according to color code. Guided conversations at each table produce new pathways for discovery.
Increasingly, Cape Verdean guests began claiming two identifying sticker colors as they discovered previously unknown Jewish ancestry, until the event’s organizers finally introduced a third color for a newly recognized category of participant: “both Cape Verdean and Jewish.”

What happens after they discover those origins remains variable. For the sake of convenience, we might divide them into three groups, although this Venn diagram reminds us that the groups overlap.
Some Cape Verdeans (represented in the top circle) end up vaguely acknowledging Jewish ancestry, including learning of the Jewish origins of some of their or their families’ daily life habits. These might include, for example, avoiding pork, putting six-pointed stars around newborns’ ankles or atop Christmas trees, or lighting candles on Friday nights. However, people with this orientation make no serious effort to change their lives toward more conscious and systematic Jewish practice or identity.

Others (represented in the bottom/left circle) develop specific knowledge of their Jewish ancestry and make some effort to incorporate this knowledge into their lives. For example, they may display ritual paraphernalia such as menorahs for the Jewish holiday of Chanukah, or read books about Jewish history. Men may try on the traditional Jewish head covering or skull cap called the kippah (Hebrew) or yahrmulke (Yiddish). But they may otherwise continue embracing a Christian identity (whether Catholic or, for some, Protestant).
However, other people start rethinking how to identify their religious affiliation—they may begin to refer to themselves as “Jewish Catholics” or “Catholic Jews.” Some marry American Jews, bringing further Jewish influence into their lives, especially if they have children with these partners.

A smaller group (represented in the bottom/right circle of the Venn diagram) find themselves moved to make serious efforts to incorporate their knowledge of their Jewish ancestry into their current lives and embrace forms of Jewish practice. They may start celebrating Jewish holidays at home; they may consider training their children for the classic Jewish coming-of-age ritual known as a bar/bat mitzvah at age 12 or 13; they may encourage their older children to visit Israel on a subsidized “birth right” trip.\(^{11}\)

An even smaller number of Cape Verdeans in the U.S. has undergone formal conversion to Judaism, becoming active members of temple communities. Two Cape Verdeans I have interviewed (one in Rhode Island, the other in the Netherlands) are exploring means to gain dual citizenship in Israel. Another Cape Verdean in Rhode

\(^{11}\) The non-profit organization, Birthright Israel, states that its “mission is to give every Jewish young adult around the world, especially the less connected, the opportunity to visit Israel on an educational trip. . . . Birthright Israel seeks to ensure the future of the Jewish people by strengthening Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and connection with Israel via a trip to Israel for the majority of Jewish young adults from around the world. Our hope is that our trips motivate young people to continue to explore their Jewish identity and support for Israel and maintain long-lasting connections with the Israelis they meet on their trip.”
Carlos Spinola has undergone formal conversion ritual to Judaism in a Conservative congregation in Rhode Island  
*(photo by Alma Gottlieb)*

Island underwent formal conversion to Orthodox Judaism and is a key member of his congregation (see Plate 11). Elsewhere, I profile the unique biographies of these and other Cape Verdeans who have forged this intense level of engagement in reclaiming their Jewish ancestry (Gottlieb, n.d.).

**Plate 11**  
*Gershom Barros underwent formal conversion to Orthodox Judaism and is a leader in his congregation in Rhode Island; here, he speaks about his journey to Judaism, at a temple outside Boston*  
*(photo by Alma Gottlieb)*

With anti-Semitism indisputably on the rise both in the US and globally, why have increasing numbers of contemporary Cabo Verdeans begun acknowledging, exploring, and sometimes practicing, a Jewish ancestry of which they had either previously remained unaware, had knowingly overlooked, or had even actively denied? Given the current political climate in the U.S., with top leadership enflaming social divisions and emphasizing geocultural borders (rather than connections), the efforts by many Cabo Verdeans to continue embracing divergent components of their multi-layered racial and spiritual heritage is notable.

In the book developing from this project, I probe a range of reasons behind this against-all-odds trend (see Note 10). Briefly, the reasons encompass a variety of factors that have converged to produce a unique moment that speaks to Cape Verdeans with Jewish ancestry. Perhaps most obviously, technology and education now converge to allow unprecedented access to knowledge via the Internet. Informational sources now abound, including social media.
Many Cape Verdeans now enjoy researching their family histories online, often with great sophistication, including engaging in genetic testing. Indeed, a Facebook group specifically devoted to Cape Verdeans researching and discussing their genetic profiles has grown rapidly to include some 6,500 members, as of this writing.\(^\text{12}\) Whether through genetic testing, online chats, library or archival research, or any other means of inquiry, Cape Verdeans sometimes discover Jewish ancestry of which they previously had either vague or no knowledge.

Sociological factors also account for greater awareness of Jewish ancestry. In southeast New England, Cape Verdeans now have increasing contact with Jews in their workplace, in their own or their children’s schools, and in community spaces. They may also become aware of Jewish ancestry via contact with other populations from former Portuguese spaces such as Brazil, where notable numbers of people are now actively recuperating their Jewish past. Such contacts sometimes motivate Cape Verdeans to inquire more systematically into their lineage, in search of previously unknown Jewish forebears.

Historical circumstances also contribute to an increasing knowledge of Jewish heritage. During the period encompassing and immediately following World War II, Cabo Verdeans who were aware of their Jewish ancestry—especially, those with relatively recent Moroccan Jewish migration stories—felt understandably reluctant to divulge that heritage. As the most dramatic effects of Hitler’s threat came to fade, these Cape Verdeans began feeling more comfortable publicly acknowledging the Jewish component of their lineage. In the U.S., starting in the 1950s, strengthening voices and movements for social justice on many registers—including post-Holocaust rejection of religious discrimination against Jews—may, likewise, have helped to account for the increasing interest among Cabo Verdeans in pursuing their Jewish ancestry.

Consider this excerpt from a conversation I had (in Portuguese) with “Orlando Benros,” a Cape Verdean man living in Lisbon:

AG: When you were a teenager, this was at the time of the Second World War. And, at that time, when the war ended . . .

[Quando estava adolescente, estava na altura de Segunda Guerra Mundial. E, no momento que a guerra terminou…]

OB: I remember it perfectly. There was a big party.

[Lembro-me perfeitamente--houve uma grande festa.]

AG: What happened?

[O que acontecia?]

OB: A party—shouting . . . in São Vicente. Because there was a telegraph machine there—Telecome, Western Union Telegraph—in a very large building full of people. . . my father spoke English . . . and we followed everything on the radio every day. The news every day. And, on the day that the war ended: well, there was a big party.

[Festa, a gritar . . . em São Vicente. Porque, havia esta telegrafe--Telecom, o Western Telegraphe--num prédio muito grande cheio de gentes. . . o meu pai era anglófono . . . e seguíamos todos os dias na rádio. Todos os dias as notícias. E, no dia em que acabou a guerra--é pá, houve uma grande festa.]

\(^\text{12}\) Website of the Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/438321819686279.
AG: But they never spoke about the problem of the Jews during the war?

[Mas nunca falaram de problema de judeus durante a guerra?]

OB: No. We knew that they were killing Jews—we knew, we knew. We knew that it was dangerous. Because if Hitler had invaded Africa and taken Cabo Verde, we knew that we were Jews . . . . Everyone was afraid. My father was (afraid.) We must have had relatives in Italy. We had an aunt in Italy. I don’t know what happened to her. . . . We could have had someone who died—I don’t know. [Otherwise,.] . . . we only knew people in Cape Verde. Those who were there, my grandfather, the uncles—we knew them because they were there. Now, our fear that my relatives had of Hitler winning--if Germany had won the war—people were afraid, because there were—they knew what would happen. We knew everything. We were afraid of them.

As this conversation suggests, the zeitgeist of historical eras strongly colors the extent to which knowledge of a vulnerable identity remains hidden or emerges in the public eye. Orlando Benros suggested to me that he was one among many elderly Cape Verdians who concealed their Jewish ancestry in the 1940s and ‘50s and beyond, and noy only because the terror of World War II was immediate, but also because invoked earlier tragedies wrought on Jewish lives by the Inquisition.

As the painful memories of the Holocaust fade, more Cape Verdians in New England have begun to feel comfortable acknowledging their Jewish heritage. I have not yet heard of any anti-Semitic backlash against this group, nor of any racism from white Jews. Two Cape Verdians who have undergone formal conversion to Judaism have become active in synagogues that have all, or mostly, white congregations. Both these men have told me about earlier incidents in their lives in which they were subject to racism by white Americans. It is all the more notable, then, that they insisted to me that they have been fully embraced by their congregations. Perhaps they enjoy membership in this largely white community as a safe space of refuge from the racism that surrounds them elsewhere.

The trend of Cape Verdians increasingly acknowledging, and sometimes embracing, their Jewish ancestry that I have summarized briefly here is decidedly strongest in the U.S. However, it is also gaining some momentum among the diaspora in Europe, and in Cabo Verde itself. Discussion of this theme in these other homeland and diasporic spaces must be left for another forum.
Concluding Thoughts

Critical race theory would suggest that their mixed-race status would incline Cabo Verdeans to feel especially aware of their racialized position, particularly in a hyper-racialized society such as the U.S. Especially among youth, awareness of the price paid for blackness in a racist society is keen, and many young Cape Verdeans across both the U.S. and Europe indeed identify as “black.” However, many other Cabo Verdeans consider themselves “mixed”—an increasingly common category in the U.S. that appears, for example, on government, school, and medical forms requesting ethnic and racial identification. Predating this new official category, an awareness of racial mixing long lay at the heart of Cape Verdean-ness. I would like to suggest that awareness of racial mixing that dates back to the inception of the society may also help explain why many Cape Verdeans increasingly embrace religious as well as ethnic mixing, as well. As one Cape Verdean woman once told me: “Well, Cape Verde is the United Nations! We’ve got everything in us!” (June 20, 2014). Although “Carolina’s” charming metaphor elides the racism that still exists within the Cape Verdean community, it also points to a discursive emphasis on mixing that is notable, and widespread among Cape Verdeans.

Inspired by Carolina, I would like to end with a provocative suggestion drawing on a theoretical framework proposed by the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. Some years ago, Geertz made a distinction that many scholars of religion have since found useful. He wrote:

The term “model” has . . . two senses—an “of” sense and a “for” sense—and though these are but aspects of the same basic concept they are very much worth distinguishing for analytic purposes. In the first, what is stressed is the manipulation of symbol structures so as to bring them, more or less closely, into parallel with the pre-established nonsymbolic system, as when we grasp how dams work by developing a theory of hydraulics or constructing a flow chart. The theory or chart models physical relationships in such a way—that is, by expressing their structure in synoptic form—as to render them apprehensible; it is a model of "reality." In the second [“model for”], what is stressed is the manipulation of the nonsymbolic systems in terms of the relationships expressed in the symbolic, as when we construct a dam according to the specifications implied in an hydraulic theory or the conclusions drawn from a flow chart. Here, the theory is a model under whose guidance physical relationships are organized: it is a model for "reality" (1973, p. 93).

Later in the same essay, Geertz expands dramatically on the significance of this distinction:

The perception of the structural congruence between one set of processes, activities, relations, entities, and so on, and another set for which it acts as a program, so that the program can be taken as a representation, or conception—a symbol—of the programmed, is the essence of human thought (1973:74).

In other words, Geertz is arguing that being able to construct a “model for [not of] reality” is a key capacity, rooted in symbolic thinking—perhaps, originally, via religion, but no more confined to religion. Indeed, insofar as it distinguishes human thought from other species’ cognitive processes, according to Geertz, this ability to construct “models for” reality is what makes us human.13

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13 For a discussion summarizing some critiques of Geertz’s position, ending with a spirited defense of the utility of his basic point he makes about “models” (both “of” and “for”), see Schilbrick (2005).
With that in mind, let us return to Cape Verde. The historian Tobias Green has written: [T]he presence of people of Jewish descent helped to shape the Caboverdean economy and modes of exchange; yet the idea of the Jew was equally, if not more, important, as helping to shape the perception and thereby the reality of the creolizing societies that evolved.\textsuperscript{14}

Here, Green is suggesting that religious mixing goes to the heart of Cape Verdean society from its inception.

If Green is right, then a Geertzian approach, melded with critical race theory, may even lead us to suggest, with all humbleness, that in these times of division, Cabo Verdeans might present an unexpected “model for” a multicultural, multiracial, and multi-faith America. This suggestion is all the more extraordinary given the intellectual (and sometimes physical) violence committed long ago by the Inquisition with the aim of annihilating all religions beyond Portugal’s officially sanctioned Catholic church—not just Judaism, but also Islam, as well as all local (“animist”) religions practiced by the first generations of Africans brought to the islands.

If an “Afro-Jewish” identity is not yet a category known to many, it is an identity that is rapidly evolving. The sociologist Laura Limonic (2019) has recently proposed something analogous in understanding the experiences of Latinx Jews in the U.S. As she observes, identity categories are never fixed, much as racialized thinking might inaccurately claim that they are rooted in biology. Rather, as social constructions, identity categories are, by definition, inevitably subject to dynamic changes in response to changing social landscapes.

I am not suggesting that Cabo Verdeans in the U.S. epitomize a utopian community in which all social divisions have been extinguished. Internal racism, as well as class divisions (largely built on educational disparities), still exist among Cabo Verdeans, sometimes producing crime within the community, and overlain by new intergenerational differences exacerbated by divergent immigrant experiences across cohorts of migrants. Nevertheless, the extent to which many Cape Verdeans are now embracing both a multi-racial and a multi-faith identity is notable. And its impact is expanding.

Last year, the Cape Veredian consul invited the Boston group that produces the annual Joint Cape Veredian-Jewish Seder to export the event to Cape Verde. No one yet knows what such an event might look like, but already, the event’s Cape Veredian and American-Jewish organizers are brainstorming. An inaugural large-scale, community Seder in Cabo Verde in either 2021 or 2022 is now being envisioned. In this year of COVID, an online Seder uniting Cabo Verdeans in the homeland with those in the diaspora, along with Jews in the U.S., is already in the planning stage.

\textsuperscript{14} Green (2007b, Ch. 4, p. 102).
Letter from the Cabo Verdean Consul General to the organizer of the Annual Jewish-Cabo Verde Seder in Boston

In short, given the contemporary rethinking of a unique historical profile, the multiple braids of population groups that combined to produce the people now called Cape Verdeans begs for attention. A combination of critical race theory and interpretive anthropology might be just what is needed to do justice to this singular group.
Work Cited


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