



10-2020

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Recommended Citation

Piazza, Marco. (2020). The Cape Verde Jews: an Identity Puzzle. *Journal of Cape Verdean Studies*, 5(1), 27-35.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jcvs/vol5/iss1/4>

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The Cape Verde Jews: an Identity Puzzle

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Abstract

The American historian and epistemologist Hayden White said that «there can be no ‘proper history’ which is not at the same time ‘philosophy of history’» (1973, p. XI). But it could also be argued that one cannot make history of philosophy or history of ideas without working on historical data. The data on which I would like to draw attention in this contribution are seemingly reducible to a small thing: they refer to a micro-history that has left few traces, some tombs, surnames, oral memories, and a couple of toponyms. In these pages I will try to show how emblematic this micro-history is to the Cape Verdean identity, the ‘caboverdianidade’ (‘Cape Verdeanness’), and how it can be so concerning identity in general. This micro-history is that of the Jewish presence in Cape Verde, on which I will provide some historical data and interpretative perspectives.

Keywords: Cape Verde, Jews, *cristãos novos*, Identity, Cape Verdeanness.

1. *Some historical data*

The expulsion of the Jews from Spain and then from Portugal, at the end of the fifteenth century, was marked by the phenomenon of forced conversions of many Jews, who became Christians in order not to be expelled. More precisely, in Spain the phenomenon of forced conversions preceded the expulsion by a century, as it began in 1391 (Yerushalmi, 1981, p. 6). In Portugal it was King Manoel I himself who, at the time he decreed their expulsion, induced the mass conversion of the Jews, who were then called *cristãos novos* (‘New Christians’) so as to distinguish them from the other Christians, now called *cristãos velhos* (‘Old Christians’) (Green, 2009, p. 110). Many of those converted in Portugal in 1497 were coming from Castile and had sought refuge in Portugal after the Catholic Monarchs expelled Jews in 1492. Those who did not intend to convert and preferred to remain faithful to their religious tradition had to leave the Iberian peninsula and emigrate to more welcoming lands, in particular by heading towards the port cities of Atlantic Europe (Correia e Silva, 1995, p. 8). In addition to those who remained Jewish in all respects, many *cristãos novos* also emigrated at that time, attracted by the commercial prospects opened by international trade and the desire to live in territories where they could freely return to profess their original cult (Gottlieb, 2019, p. 52). After the establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal in 1536, the *cristãos novos* left the country to escape the violence of the persecutions (Yerushalmi, 1981, p. 8). In fact, they were suspected of judaizing, that is, of having converted only on the surface – in order to remain in their countries of residence – while secretly professing their old worship. Just before, the Portuguese crown also turned to the reservoir of *cristãos novos* individuals to be forcibly sent towards overseas territories as settlers.

Among the destinations of the *cristãos novos* who ‘deliberately’ left the Iberian peninsula were the islands of Cape Verde. However, for the Sephardic Jews who fled, this destination was

probably not as attractive, since they knew that there would be no local Jewish community to welcome them, as well as no organized cult. Now, the *cristãos novos*, were attracted to such a remote place deprived of any Jewish community for two main reasons: the greater chances to continue to judaize in a hidden way, as crypto-Jews, and the attractive prospects of trade opened by triangular traffic. This is demonstrated by the fact that the sources speak above all of *cristãos novos* rather than *judeus* ('Jews') (Baleno, 1991, p. 151) although some documents refer to them with the expression *gente da nação/gente de nação* ('people of the nation', that is, 'people of the Jewish nation') (or *homens da nação/homens de nação*, 'men of the Nation', that is, 'men of the Jewish nation': see Carreira, 2000, p. 177), which refers directly and explicitly to their Jewish identity. The latter expression is used especially in reference to traders with the Guinean coast from European ports, who certainly recognized in the *cristãos novos* of trading partners more reliable than others (Torrão, 1995, p. 74; Santos & Soares, 1995, p. 487; it should also be considered that in the second quarter of sixteenth century the slave traders from Castile were almost all *conversos*, the Spanish equivalent of *cristãos novos*: Gil, 2001, p. 49-51). The *cristãos novos* exploited their own diversity – due to the special jurisdiction to which they were subjected, which forbade them a whole series of offices and duties - to specialize in commerce and, in fact, in Portugal one of the ways to refer to them was the expression *homens de negócios*, that is, «men of affairs» (Yerushalmi, 1981, p. 16).

Those who settled in the archipelago were *cristãos novos*, as it is also demonstrated by the fact that the surnames of these people, with some exceptions, are generally surnames that the Jews have assumed in order to cancel their origins by recycling themselves as Christians (see below). In some cases, as mentioned above, their emigration to Cape Verde was encouraged since the end of the fifteenth century by the Portuguese monarchy, looking for settlers to be sent to the islands, with no need for authorization between 1507 and 1515, after the terrible 1506 pogrom in Lisbon (Green, 2006, p. 68; Baleno, 1991, p. 151). And after tensions arose with the local majors, the measures taken to limit and regulate the stabilization of the *cristãos novos* in the islands were ineffective, so their influx was constant during the sixteenth century (*ibid.*, p. 164, 170) and their presence remained consistent around the middle of following century, as attested by the documents of the time (Cohen, 2002, p. 91). Although they were far from the center of the kingdom, the *cristãos novos* were nevertheless always in danger of being reached by the eye of the Inquisition, even in the archipelago and on the coast of Guinea, where many of them engaged in trade. Perhaps, they also considered themselves freer to profess their old cult there than in the confined space of the islands (see Santos & Soares, 1995, p. 401, 486). After all, in the 1580s, the Inquisition proposed twice to make official visits to the islands... (Silva, 2004, p. 159). And it is certain that in the sixteenth century in Ribeira Grande (today's Cidade Velha, that is the ancient capital, on the island of Santiago), there was a ghetto, which at the time was located in a street that was still called Calháu during the eighteenth century (Carreira, 2000, p. 287).

In the history books one can find little more, at best the hypothesis that the *lançados*, that is, the merchants who threw themselves inside the territory of Guinea to do business (see Berry, 1998, p. 41-42; Mendes, 2004, p. 143), were in many cases *cristãos novos*. This hypothesis actually supported by evident documentary data (see Baleno 1991, p. 169; Torrão, 1991, p. 247, 254-255; Cohen, 1995, p. 196), so much so that the Inquisition around the middle of the sixteenth century estimated that the *cristãos novos lançados* were around two hundred (Torrão, 1991, p. 255). These merchants and adventure-seekers often mingled with the Africans, embraced their local rites (Santos & Soares, 1995, p. 486), joined their women and had children

with these, as in a famous case in which one of them married a king's daughter and became very powerful (Green, 2006, p. 212).

Today, some typical (but not exclusive) surnames of *cristãos novos* remain in the Cape Verdean population, like all surnames related to the plant and animal kingdom, such as the Cabral ('she-goat breeder'), the Coelho ('rabbit', according to some instead of surname Cohen), the Lobo ('wolf'), the Pinto ('chick'), the Carvalho ('oak'), the Figueira ('fig tree'), the Oliveira ('olive oil seller'), the Pereira ('place with pear tree' to designate Spain, also called 'Perera'), the Pinheiro ('pine tree'), the Rosa ('rose'), and the Silva ('bush'), or some surnames related to cities or places, such as the Leão (from 'Leon' in Spain) or Lima (from 'Ponte de Lima' in Portugal) (Faiguenboim, Valadares, Campagnano, 2003). But also other surnames still widespread today in the archipelago, such as Henriques, Mendes, or Rodrigues, were frequent among the *cristãos novos* (*ibidem*), and also among those inhabited the islands, as evidenced by the documentation cited in these pages (above all: Green, 2006, 2009). Incidentally, this does not mean that those who today bear these surnames descend biologically from *cristãos novos*, because it must be taken into account that their ancestors might have been enslaved by European slave traders and have been obliged to adopt such surnames from their owners (Gottlieb, 2019, p. 58, note n. 33).

After centuries, we find again Jews in Cape Verde, that is Sephardic Jews from Morocco, who settled in the islands around the middle of the nineteenth century, after a massacre of 400 Moroccan Jews in the city of Tetouan. Next to the Jews from Morocco (particularly from Tanger, Tetouan, Rabat and Mogador, the latter now being Essaouira), others Jews arrived at that time from Gibraltar, Algiers and Tunis, to settle in Cape Verde; they had the British nationality for the most part (Correia, 2015, p. 16). In this case it is correct to speak of Jews in all respects. Again the choice of Cape Verde is determined by political and economic conditions: on the one hand, the abolition of the Inquisition in the Portuguese Empire (1821) and on the other interesting commercial prospects opened by Treaty on Trade and Navigation between Great Britain and Portugal in 1842 (*ibid.*, p. 17). The various clauses of the Treaty included freedom of worship, which allowed for people to celebrate rites in designated places, and to bury their dead according to the ceremonies of their own religion (*ibidem*). It was also suggested that the emigration of Moroccan Jews was favoured by the consequences of the Spanish-Moroccan War of 1859-1860, which had led many Jews to seek refuge elsewhere (Serels, 1997). It is the combination of these three factors that pushed Jews to settle in a place without a community and where the conditions to found one or several of them were then given. The tendency to assimilate that characterizes Judaism in the western world in the nineteenth century and that it goes hand in hand with the establishment of civil rights for centuries denied to Jews in all Europe, together with the scarcity of women emigrated along with these traders and entrepreneurs mainly from North Africa, push them to join with local women, giving rise to a mixed descent in the islands, and to move away from the Mosaic religion rather quickly. In 1872 in the island of Santo Antão, for example, only 12 Jews out of 54 practiced their religion (Correia, 2015, p. 19). They are, among other, the Benholiel (later also: Benoliel), the Brigham, the Wahnnon (later also: Wahnnon), the Bendavid (later also: Ben David), the Benros, the Cohen, whose descendants still live on the islands, even though within two generations they have assimilated and have ceased to practice Jewish rites.

As of today, the only remnants of this Sephardic presence consist in a few Jewish cemeteries, toponyms, surnames, and family memories. But there are no Jewish practitioners on the islands. Regarding cemeteries, these were of two types: separate or attached to public cemeteries. In the first case, we know the three cemeteries on the island of Santo Antão, in Ponta

do Sol (whose authorization dates back to 1894: *ibid.*, p. 108), Penha de França and Paul, and that of Pico da Rixa in Sal-Rei, on the island of Boavista. In the second case, there are attached areas in the municipal cemetery of Praia, on the island of Santiago (whose authorization dates back to 1865: *ibidem*), in the cemetery of Tabuga, near Vila da Ribeira Brava, on the island of São Nicolau, and in the cemetery of Chã de Cemitério, in Mindelo, on the island of São Vicente. As for the toponyms, we remember Sinagoga on the island of Santo Antão or Covo de Judeu in Brava. Cemeteries and places of Jewish memory are increasingly at the center of recovery and enhancement projects: in June 2017 the Cape Verdean government declared these as “National Historic Patrimony”, and projects for the recovery and restoration of burials have been promoted, as well as archive research and interviews with descendants of Sephardic families, such as those carried out in the framework of the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Research Project (see at <https://capeverdejewishheritage.org/cape-verde-jewish-heritage-project-inc/>).

2. *Four points of view*

Faced with this micro-history, some points of view have stabilized over the years, so to speak.

The first and most widespread reads this historical presence as one of the various components of a mixture of people and cultures. It is the position expressed in an exemplary way by the novelist Germano Almeida, who said in an interview: «Well, all the Jews in Cabo Verde have died. But many, many Jews came to the islands and married Cape Verdeans, and had children with Cape Verdeans. So although they’ve all died, they mixed with us, and they are part of us» (2007, in Gottlieb, 2015, p. 34).

The second point of view emphasizes the strategic role of the Jew, who is capable of adapting to any context and in the case of the *crístãos novos*, is also inclined to mix with the local population and to blend in. It is the model of the ‘chameleon Jew’ who, if it were not for the faith and rituals he observes, would be indistinguishable from the rest of the population. An ambiguous model, which was used in the past by the Jews themselves against their detractors to demonstrate the potential for integration of their own people, as does Isaac de Pinto, a Dutch Sephardic Jew, who wrote an apology of the Jews arguing with anti-Jewish stances by Voltaire (see Sutcliffe, 2000).

The third point of view is probably the most difficult to accept, because it alludes to an uncomfortable reality: the crypto-Jews or *crístãos novos* represented one of the white components in the slave trade and this represents a stain to hide; it also partly explain the scarcity of studies on the phenomenon at least until recently (see Green, 2006, p. 25, 97, 128). Just as Christians must ask the Jews for forgiveness for centuries of persecution – as the papacy has partially done in 2000 with Pope Wojtyła – so the Jews should ask the blacks for forgiveness for making them suffer during the colonial age what they had suffered even from the Christians. It is a brave position, expressed in a touching way by the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Éliane Amado Lévy-Valensi in a conference held in the early 1960s and in which the reference to the current era is Apartheid in South Africa and the framework of her speech is the great theme of forgiveness (Amado Lévy-Valensi, 1965). The author explains the racism by the white Jew toward the black with the illusion of the first to find in the second someone who is more different from the majority than himself (Ombrosi, 2010, p. 348). But making the Jew a paradigm of humanity itself, elsewhere the author considers the racist Jew an inauthentic Jew, since «the heart of the true Jew feels and discovers suffering wherever it is» (Amado Lévy-Valensi, 1962, p. 563). Amado Lévy-Valensi anchors her psychosocial analysis in a theological

matrix rooted in the message of the the Old Testament and in the «maximal justice» that is implied in it and that coincides with the same «charity» (*ibid.*, p. 590-591).

The fourth point of view consist in a sort of proud reevaluation of the ancient Jewish roots of the Cape Verdean people: it claims that the Jewish contribution to the construction of Creole culture starts from the analogy between Jews and Africans as victims of persecution, in the light of historic awareness of the tragedy of the Shoah and the end of the colonial ruling. This also happens because of the general climate of affirmation of the particularities and ethnic identities that originated in the last decades of the twentieth century, when even in Cape Verde the interest for the ancient Jewish traces began to grow, as evidenced by some articles published in the Belgian magazine «Los Muestrros», partly written in the ancient Judeo-Spanish language and subtitled «The Sephardic Voice» (i.e. Massart, 1994; Serels, 1996, Castiel, 1997). It is a point of view that has gone so far as to generate a sort of invention of identity, that of those who proclaim themselves «CaJu», that is, both Catholic and Jewish (Gottlieb, 2015, p. 45-46). This proposal was recently made by intellectuals of the young Cape Verdean generations, descendants of Sephardic families who emigrated to Cape Verde in the nineteenth century, who moved in a transnational cultural space that has a privileged reference in the USA, and who are dedicated to genealogical research, boasting of the Jewish ancestry of their families (i.e. see at <http://thecreolagenealogist.com>; Gottlieb, 2019), and working in partnership with The Friends of Israel and Cape Verde Association (AMICAEL), based in Praia from the nineties of the twentieth century and devoted to the preservation of Jewish memory in the archipelago.

In parentheses and without any polemic vein, family traditions are not dictated only by biological factors (as it turns out in some cases almost unforeseeable: see towards the end of this blog page: <https://thecreolagenealogist.com/2012/04/>), but by arbitrary selections stratified over time (Zerubavel, 2003). Also, the presence of genetic affinities with one group or another in a given population is not an automatic reflection of a cultural heritage. The results of a recent study which shows an irrelevant trace of the presence of Sephardic Jews in the genetic makeup of a sample of Cape Verdeans (Beleza *et al.*, 2012) certainly cannot undo the amount of historical data contained in the documentary and bibliographical sources reported in these pages! The history of cultural influences is a more complex plot than a family tree and for this reason, research on human DNA must be intertwined with that of historians and other scientists in order to create complex interpretations, as the population genetics itself suggests (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, Piazza, 1994). In other words, just as a surname does not necessarily mean a biological offspring, a biological offspring does not necessarily correspond to a family inheritance.

For this reason as well the scenario is perhaps even more intriguing...

3. *To be cristão novo...*

Let's go back over the centuries. Today it is difficult for us to understand what a *cristão novo* had to feel in his or her relationship both to Judaism and to the Christian world, which had him or her becoming accustomed to being confused and which could drag him or her before the Inquisition at any time. From the few remaining documents it is nevertheless clear that if on the one hand the *cristãos novos* were directly involved in the slave trade and for at least a century and a half they represented an essential component of the slave economy, on the other hand they were constantly subject to retaliation by the *cristãos velhos*, who perceived them as a threat to their interests and did not hesitate to denounce them to the Inquisition to stem their economic power. In fact, *cristãos novos* were constantly victims of attacks or boycott by *cristãos velhos* and there are several documented cases. For instance, Diogo Barasa, a civil servant of the

registry in Santiago, was wronged by Francisco Pereira, who tried to remove him from his office with the authorities in 1559, by referring among other things to his condition of *cristão novo*. Another case is that of the d'Afonseca brothers, in 1542 (Cohen, 2002, p. 88, 131-132). Either way, they also made a career in the administration of the islands, precisely by virtue of the positions acquired as merchant or *rendeiros* (i.e. tenants) (see *ibid.*, p. 89, note n. 89). For instance, the goldsmith João Rodrigues Freire was accused five times before the Inquisition and object of denunciations of Judaizing activities among others. After thirty-three years since the first dangerous accusations he manages to get a prestigious position as *escrivão dos contos do Almojarifado* (Scribe of the Accounts of the Royal Exchequer) in 1663 (Green, 2009, p. 111-113).

For at least two centuries the *cristãos novos* are thus on the edge of social exclusion and their often successful attempts to obtain coveted positions does not deprive them of the awareness of the precariousness of their status; it actually endows them with a sensitivity towards those who are made the object of exclusion and discrimination. This is demonstrated by the fact that they were able to limit the excesses of Portuguese politics by defending the mulattoes and the blacks and putting themselves in danger in front of the Crown's power. They could even become models to imitate and emulate, as in the case of the populations especially of the coast of Africa, where the *cristãos novos* as *lançados* were proselytizing the religion of Israel (Green, 2006, p. 195): their motto could be 'Become Jew if you want to be rich'!

But they also became victims of the Inquisition, so much so that the 1582 rebellion in Fogo against the promoters of the Inquisition under the management of Felipe I was led precisely by the *cristãos novos*, who considered themselves to be personally threatened (Barcellos, 1889, p. 157). Throughout the seventeenth century they remained closely guarded by Inquisition, although Cape Verde was still one of the safest places to hide and mingle among the people, as evidenced by some judaizing *cristãos novos* who were persecuted in South America – where, especially in Brazil, many *cristãos novos* had fled (see Novinsky, 1995, p. 515) – and took refuge in the islands in order to escape the Inquisition (Green, 2006, p. 304). The complaints to the Inquisition were also motivated by commercial reasons: in this way the *cristãos velhos* tried to get rid of skilled rivals in trade with the excuse that pagan rites were being done in synagogues set up at home, as in the case of the governor Jorge Mesquita de Castelo Branco who denounced Manoel Henriques and Pedro de Bairros (*ibid.*, p. 287).

Recent investigations have established that between 1536 and 1821, 546 complaints were filed with the Inquisition about the islands, of which 233 were related to the crime of «Judaism» (Silva, 2004, p. 163, 166). «The denunciations for belief in the mosaic cult were based on three basic factors, namely to be *cristão novo*, to be silent in the observance of Catholic rites or to show disrespect for Christian belief, and finally to adopt explicit practices of Jewish worship» (*ibid.*, p. 168).

In spite of this, the *cristãos novos* did not hesitate to pass on another group considered 'weak', that is the blacks, the stigma of exclusion, suggesting that the *cristãos novos* by definition cannot be white-skinned... (see the exemplary case of the petition of some residents of Santiago reported in Green, 2009, p. 116). All this suggests a chiaroscuro image of the *cristãos novos*, who in their attempt to defend themselves from the policy of exclusion that marked social relations in the archipelago for centuries, are both victims and victors, persecuted and persecutors, solidarity people and traitors, as could be done for the other discriminated social groups (mulattoes and blacks), which slowly formed the Creole identity of the islands, an identity not only biological but also and above all cultural.

4. *Conclusions with an unknown Italian source*

Recalling these events, what I would like to emphasize here is that talking about Cape Verde Jews is generally inappropriate because too restrictive. It may be valid for the group that arrived from Morocco directly or via Gibraltar in the mid-nineteenth century, but not for the phenomenon that I have tried to recall and that has marked the history of the islands practically from the beginning.

We are talking about a complex and composite reality because the *cristãos novos* on the one hand are certainly not all of them Judaizers and on the other hand, those who were could not openly manifest themselves as Jews (see Carreira, 2000, p. 76). However, it is a numerous reality, as evidenced by several documents, partly known partly less known, such as following testimony of an Italian traveller.

According to the Florentine merchant Galeotto Cei, who lands in Santiago towards the end of August 1539 and remains on the island for three weeks, where he buys 40 slaves, the archipelago was inhabited essentially by three groups: the governors of the island, the Portuguese, and the slaves. In describing the second group, he specifies that these are individuals sent there by force to confinement by the royal authorities, in order to avoid crowding the prisons and at the same time to supply overseas territories with settlers. In short, a «foam of all the rascals», who «marry with those Ethiopian black slaves, or with mulattoes, who are the daughters of white man and black woman, of whom there are many». «Gentleman» is only one who resides «in government for the king». And when he returns to the composition of the Portuguese group, he concludes: «these islands are populated by stragglers and new Christians, all founded on deception» (Cei, 1992, p. 3). It follows that for Cei the white component, of Portuguese origin, is at least half made up of *cristãos novos*. This fact is confirmed eighty years later, when, in 1619, a document drawn up by the Jesuits indicates in order of numerical importance: Creole mulattos, *cristãos novos*, clerics from Portugal and *cristãos velhos*. Those Jesuits were actively involved in slave trafficking and trading with the *cristãos novos* until 1640 (Green, 2009, p. 109).

Creolization, that is, the formation of Creole culture in Cape Verde, is therefore imbued with Jewish traits: the *cristãos novos* creolize, marry like the *cristãos velhos*, and perhaps even more than them, the mulatto and the black women. And they find in the African matrilineal system (widespread in Senegambia and in Kaabu: Barry, 1998, p. 28-29) a cultural feature compatible with the typically Jewish one!

At the origin of the miscegenation that produced the Cape Verdean population and the Creole identity stands the fundamental contribution of the component of the New Christians and their 'impure' identity: as in Russian dolls, white people from Portugal were not all Old Christians, but they carried with them all ambiguities related to their Jewish origins.

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