

## THE LIGHTER SIDE OF JUDEO-SPANISH TRADITIONAL SONG: SOME CANADIAN EXAMPLES<sup>1</sup>

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Over the past few decades, Judeo-Spanish traditional song has received tremendous attention from scholars<sup>2</sup>. Most of this attention has been concentrated on the ballad (*romances*) tradition, with its strong links to medieval and Renaissance Spain; recently, some attention has also been given to life and calendrical cycle genres. But almost all the studies have been serious, even solemn in tone, and have virtually ignored the sense of fun that pervades many aspects of the Judeo-Spanish tradition, both in content and in performance practice. Using mostly examples collected in the thriving Sephardic communities of Montreal and Toronto, mostly of Northern Moroccan origin<sup>3</sup>, I propose to explore the "lighter side" of this venerable tradition.

Various manifestations of humour and levity can be classified under the following provisional categories:

1) *bawdy humour* — often related to erotic lyric poetry, which in turn may be related to religious metaphor;

2) *merriment related to life and calendrical cycle festivities*;

3) *satire and parody* — often of recent composition;

4) *miscellaneous*, including tragedies seen as amusing (performance practice), tricks, animal stories.

Each of these categories contains songs from various genres of the repertoire: *romances* (ballads), life and calendrical cycle songs, and songs of recent and known composition. For reasons of space, I will not include every genre in discussions of each category, and will concentrate on songs collected in Canada. Also for reasons of space, I have not given full texts for the songs published elsewhere; the interested reader can find them through the footnotes and song reference numbers provided.

### 1) **Bawdy Humour.**

For Moroccan Judeo-Spanish Jews, the prime example of a bawdy song is probably the *romance* (ballad) of *Fray Pedro*, Brother Peter (Q7)<sup>4</sup>. This ballad, known more commonly as "Pai Pero," is one of the few which are sung as wedding songs. In it, Brother Peter is that stock figure, the lascivious priest: while sitting in the sun with his "rope" hanging out, Pai Pero is invited to join the "ladies" (nuns) who have been watching him. They inquire what "it" is, and he tells them it is his "hunting gun." Upstairs, the "ladies" wash him with rosewater and weigh him on golden scales. He impregnates all 120 of them; each eventually has a baby girl, and the cook produces a boy. No matter how often Gerineldo has sung this song, even to the same audience, it never fails to elicit gales of laughter.

The wedding song repertoire is a rich source of bawdy humour; like the ballads, these songs would usually be sung by groups of women. In *La novia destrenza el pelo* (III), the erotic references progress from suggestive to explicit: "The bride lets down her hair and the groom faints; don't faint, groom; I have the 'arms' here; clouds float in the sky and the groom gets wet; Shawil bends over to put on his boots and his balls are showing..."

MELODY 1. *La Novia destrenza el pelo* (from the repertoire of GERINELDO<sup>5</sup>)

(9 measures) *deum: 112 112 112 112 etc.*

1. La no-via des-trenza el pe-lo, se des-ma-ya el ca-bi-lle-ro, y  
 2. Nubes au-daz por el-cie-lo, que me-éan al ca-bu-lle-ro, y

¿quién le i-ra a llamar, que le i-ra, a lla-mar al no-rio, y quién le i-ra a lla-mar?

*(10 measures 2: 112)*

2) Merriment related to life and calendrical cycle activities:

Loud and joyful ululations, called *you-you's* or *barwalá's* are trilled by Moroccan Jewish women to punctuate wedding songs and songs celebrating other happy events such as births and certain religious celebrations.

The wedding song has already been discussed to some extent above, and in Cohen 1985 and Anahory-Librowicz and Cohen 1986. The most famous wedding song in the Moroccan repertoire is actually a *romance*, which originally had a tragic ending, *Rahél Lastimosa*<sup>6</sup> (M7). An adulterous woman would be put to death, but the original ballad was gradually changed by Moroccan Jewish singers over the centuries so that Rahel, the heroine, emerges with her virtue intact, having refused the advances and returned the offerings of her would-be lover. The general spirit of merriment which characterizes the singing of the song is accentuated by a brief refrain in Arabic: *agüed agüed* or “again, again!”, which is shouted after every verse.

MELODY 2. *Rahél Lastimosa*.<sup>7</sup>

*8a6 (Steady dolce rhythm)*

1. Esta Ra-hél lasti-mo-sa, lasti-ma que Dio la dio —  
 siendo mu-ñer de quén e-ra, mu-ñer de un go-berna-dor, “A-güed, Agüed!”

⑧ CAN BE SUNG 8a6 FROM HERE TO END OF SONG.

The groom may be a figure of fun, as in *La Cena del despozado* (LI), where he is given a sardine and black bread for dinner and told he must wait for love until morning, for there is no bed. Or it may be the bride herself: in a popular Salonican song sung to me in Montreal by Buena Sarfatty Garfinkle, the groom says “If your father doesn’t give me 1500 *liras*, I’m going to replace you with *raki* made by Nahmias.” In “Cuan bien me lavi”, collected by Susana Weich-Shahaq from a Bulgarian informant, the bride enumerates various luxuries — soap, servants, cosmetics — with the refrain “Let my brother-in-law pay for it.”<sup>8</sup>

### MELODY 3. *A la doura.*

*Quasi* (Steady rhythm)

1. Si tu papa no me vava dar mil y quinien-tos li-ras,  
 Ay-de, mil y qui-nien-tos li-ras-,  
 yo a ti te vo remplasar como raki "Nah-mi-as",  
 Ay-de, como Ra-ki "Nah-mi-as"-'.

*Refrein:* A la doura, doura, doura, doura, du-ra, Ay-de, va-te, la kambu-ra

Several religious holidays are festive and joyous without being exactly mirthful, but Purim, which celebrates the story of Esther, is an occasion where merrymaking is actually required. Traditionally, it is accompanied by much singing and, exceptionally, a good deal of wine consumption. Masquerades, pantomimes and even operettas are also part of the festivities; Mrs. Garfinkle, mentioned above, sang me excerpts of Purim operettas performed in Salonica in her youth. The *Coplas de Purim* are narrative songs popular in both Moroccan and Eastern Judeo-Spanish communities. In the following version, sung to me by Solly Levy, a member of GERINELDO, the story is told "con risos y cantos y con gran plaser" — "with laughter and song and great pleasure."

### MELODY 4. *Coplas de Purim*

*Quasi* (flowing narrative)

1. Empe-sar quiebo con-tae hechas-del-Dio-al-to, de lo to,  
 qué voy agmen-tar na-da-yo-no-fal-  
 con ri-sos y can-tos- y con gran plaser, porqué Haman el manzer-  
 mos quiebo ma-tae- nos, tambien a-te-mar-mos. ¿oid lo qué...

### 3) Satire and parody:

A good deal of humour arises from the sheer use of Judeo-Spanish. Especially in Morocco, which is so close to Spain, and where Judeo-Spanish speakers alternate at will between formal Spanish and the Moroccan dialect, *haketia*, the mere use of dialect words implies in-jokes comprehensible only to the community. Solly Levy authored two musicals for GERINELDO; in both of them the dialogue is in *haketia*, and when the shows are performed for Moroccan Judeo-Spanish-speaking

Jewish audiences, the reaction is unfettered hilarity, which increases in direct proportion to the incidence of words and phrases unique to *haketa* appearing in the dialogue. One of the many times I recorded the well-known cumulative wedding song "Dize la muestra novia" ("So says the Bride") (XLIV) in Montreal, it was sung to me by two elderly ladies, first cousins. One of them occasionally substituted a term in *haketa* for a Spanish term, e.g. *hanóna* (from Moroccan Arabic) instead of *naríz* for "nose," and both of them would dissolve into giggles.

Mr. Levy also sang for me several amusing parodies he remembered singing before emigrating to Canada in the late 1960s in Morocco. One of them uses the melody of *Rahél Lastimosa* (see melody 2) to relate the mock-tragic story of a bullfighter, and another retains the words of *Rahél Lastimosa* but sings them to the well-known Mexican *ranchero* "Guadajajara..."

### MELODY 5. *En la plaza de Linares.*

♩ = 8 bars

1. En la pla-za de Li-na-res, va yasha-ray, un plato a-bul —  
 2. Y esa maes-tro en el ar-te de fi-zuelas y ma-rau-chi-nas,  
 ha ca-i-do pa-ra siem-pre - un gran to-re-ro an-da-luz, 'A-güed, güed!  
 Mano-le-te ya se fue - ka-pa-ra por me-na-hem, ...

Another piece in Mr. Levy's repertoire is a contrafact of the *Coplas de las flores* ("Verses of the Flowers") in which various flowers each announce themselves the most beautiful and thus the most suited to praise the Creator. In the contrafact, there are no flowers — the speakers are Roosevelt and Churchill, and Churchill begins with the same words as the original song: "No hay mas mejor que mí" — "There is none better than I."

### MELODY 6. *Coplas de las flores & contrafact.*

♩ = 8 bars (joyful, flowing)

JUANITA: A-zun-ta en se las fl-ores,  
 CONTRAFACT: y ni-no Churchill y di-ño,  
 lo-an-do a-dio a-u-na,  
 que na-hay más mi-zor que mí,  
 que las cai-o tan do-no-sas,  
 ¡el es-pi-ri-tu de Roose-velt  
 lin-das sin fal-tar nin-gu-na...  
 fue-ra pa-ra es-Be-liu  
 DC with no Pause or  
 last time

Knowing my interest in the less solemn side of Judeo-Spanish song, Mr. Levy directed me to a friend of his in Toronto, Tangiers-born Jack Benlolo. Mr. Benlolo, who arrived in Canada in 1957, was one of the first Moroccan Jews to settle here. He has composed several songs based on popular Spanish and French tunes, all in *haketia*. My favourite tells the story of two young Moroccan Jewish men and the hardships they must endure to obtain a visa, cross the ocean and accustom themselves to the climactic and financial difficulties of life in Canada. The words themselves are amusing; perhaps even more so is the choice of melody — *Dominique*, the once popular composition of “The Singing Nun.” I give the text here as sung to me by Mr. Benlolo, who noted that he often improvises other verses, so the text is not fixed. Here, then, is a Canadian Judeo-Spanish song:

REFRAIN:

Avramico y Davico fueron a la emigración, hazer la petición  
Pasaron días y semanas y el visado no llegaba, y el pasaporte caducaba.

VERSES:

1. Los llamo la emigración, y una sorpresa los dió  
ha l' aqui los visados y los ticke' para'l vapor.
2. Se metieron al vapor, y la tormenta empesó,  
de vapor a estribor y todo el mundo provoquó.
3. Ay, lleguimos al Canadá, en plena temporada  
de frios y nevadas, ay, mas to' quien lo va'guantar.
4. Ay, menos mal que en las cazas calentito unos da  
no faltan colchas ni mantas para poderse *hayerar*.
5. Ay, si un piso quieres buscar ni os no quieren tomar  
dizen que hazen ruidos, y oyen por ellos *kapará*.
6. Si al llegar al Canada, te quedates sin *argent de poche*,  
muy pronto te lo darán, en casa de “Papa Poche”.

(Avramico and Davico went to Immigration to request a visa; days and weeks went by with no visa or passport. Immigration called them with a surprise: the visas and boat tickets are ready. In the boat the storms started and everyone was sick. We arrived in Canada in the middle of winter cold and snow; at least the houses were warm and there were blankets and mattresses. If you want to rent a flat no one will take you, they say you will make noise. If you are without pocket money in Canada, go to Papa Poche [Louis Poche, then head of the Toronto branch of Jewish Immigration Aid Services]. [*Kapará*: from Hebrew “sacrifice”])

MELODY 7: Avramico y Davico.

*Samb (canta, o rabe) (brightly)*

Refrain Avra-mi-co y Da-vi-co fue-ron a la emi-gra-ción, ha-zer la pe-ti-ción,

pa-sa-ron días y se-manas, y el vi-sa-do no lle-ga-ba, y el pa-sa-por-te ca-du-ca-ba. *Poco*

1. Los llama la emi-gra-ción, y una sor-pre-sa los dió, ha l' a-quí los vi-sa-dos, y los ti-ke' pa-ra el va-por. *D.C.*

Before continuing this section with some examples from the Eastern Mediterranean repertoire, I will present one more song. I hesitated over whether to include it here or in the first category, and finally left it for this section because of its interesting contrafacts. I first learned it as a very short song for Passover, from Dr. Anahory Librowicz: "Sister Simha, Passover has arrived, it's time to put away any leavened food and keep only what is kosher for Passover." A contrafact of this song appeared on a record produced by the Moroccan Jewish community in Madrid, where Dr. Anahory-Librowicz and Jacob Hassan also recorded it: *Jacob y Mazaltov* (Jacob and Mazaltov, a woman's name taken straight from the Hebrew expression "Good fortune"). This song is fully quoted and transcribed in Anahory-Librowicz and Cohen 1987. An English rough translation would read: "Jacob is frying fried fish; where did he fry it? in Mazaltov's oven. Oh what a frying pan has Mazaltov! Who heated it up? Mr. Jacob." The other two verses follow the same format, substituting hot bread baked in Mazaltov's "oven" and fresh parsley planted in Mazaltov's "garden." To add to the interest of these two sets of words, bawdy and paraliturgical, Solly Levy told me that he had often heard not only the famous Hebrew Sabbath hymn *Leha dodi*, but also the solemn prayer *Yitgadal* sung to the same melody. At my request he sang the four sets of words in succession; on transcribing the session I found that although the melody remained the same the tempo and the ornamentation style altered depending on the words, from fast and hardly ornamented in the bawdy text to slow and more ornamented in the sacred texts.

MELODY 8. *Jacob y Mazaltov*. Coll. O. Anahory-Librowicz.

(briskly + slyly)

1. Pes- ca- do feito ven- de. Ya- a- có- en la sación de Mazal- to:  
 ¡A- jay, qué sarkén, que tiene Mazal- to! ¿Ande lo fri- o? - el Se- ñor da- a- có!

Amusing songs from the Judeo-Spanish communities of Greece and Turkey abound, and I was able to record several from Turkish informants in Montreal and Toronto, as well as a considerable number from Mrs. Garfinkle of Salonica. She attributed some of these to Leon Botón and Sadík "el Ciego" ("The Blind") or "El Gozós" ("The Jolly"), explaining that the two men were always present at celebrations and would sing both traditional and new songs, the latter often improvised to fit the occasion. Subsequently, in the archives of the Arias Montano Institute, with the help of Leonor Carracedo, I was able to find full texts for several of these songs, which Mrs. Garfinkle remembered incompletely. Many were parodies of popular French and South American tunes of the day. Mrs. Garfinkle sang one which she herself identified as being based on Maurice Chevalier's "Valentine", and which the booklet in the Arias Montano Archive presented as *La Mujer que cale tomar*, a "duet between Pepe and Jacques."

## MELODY 9. *La Mujer que cale tomar.*

Band

Yo quiero muEer que sea bien vestida, que tenga sex appeal y que sea bien vesti-da,  
 et se-a de saloo, y buena,educación, y dEÜ-gar vio-lon,  
 el pia-no que sepa bien tocar, como flam-ma, a la cama,  
 y que sepa bien ñeque y arregl-las, y bien pensar. FINE

-Tu i-de-a, Pepe, no la to-po fina, quieres tener una kulla de vi-tai-NA,  
 para tomar mu-zer, ainsi, à la l'è-gèr, es mizer de se saber meca- De F. al FINE.

### Translation:

Pepe: I want a woman who is well-dressed, has sex appeal, at home in a *salon*, well-educated, plays violin and piano, and is like a flame in bed — who can play and arrange music — and hair...

Jacques: Pepe, what you want is a mannequin, this is not the way to choose a woman, “à la légère”...

In a somewhat different vein, Dr. Martin Schwartz of Berkeley, California, very generously sent me a tape with samples of his vast collection of early and generally unavailable Sephardic recordings. One item was recorded in Istanbul in 1912, *Mme Gaspard se fué al carsí* — “Madame Gaspard went to the market”, and is based on the cumulative French folksong of that name. The Judeo-Spanish text faithfully follows the list of animals acquired, with onomatopoetic renderings of their respective cries. This is amusing enough, but the best part is perhaps the instrumental postlude which takes off on the French folk tune in a typical middle eastern improvisation, performed on the violin, before returning to the original tune.

### 4) Miscellaneous

Some rather unlikely sources of mirth were serious ballads sung for me by elderly ladies of the Montreal community. Nothing in the content of the songs, especially one of them, suggested anything to laugh about. In *Diego Leon* (J5), which is a love story with a happy ending, the ladies simply had a good time singing it during a bingo game and their group rendition (though ballads are usually sung as solos) became progressively more hilarious and speeded up till it was almost unrecognizable. In another, my very first informant, Mme Mercedes Bohbot, sang an elegantly ornamented version of the ballad *Landrico* (M8), in which an adulterous queen is discovered and punished by her royal husband. After singing the ballad with classic balladic restrained pathos, Senora Bohbot got to the last line, “and so he cut out her tongue” — and broke into gleeful chuckles.

## MELODY 10: *Landrico*

Beat = ♩ : leisurely, rubato

1. Le-van-to-se, el rey a ca-zar, un lu-res por la-ma-ña-na,  
y-fué a-vea a la rei-na, por ver co-me, el-bo-re-a-ba.

The attitudes described in the renditions of these two ballads do not, of course, constitute the only or even the most common approach to ballad singing. Certainly, the ballads are often sung with the solemnity many of their themes seem to demand, and in many cases the singers, usually women, empathize deeply with the protagonists of the songs. I simply quote these cases as reminders that scholarly gravity — and, recently, the equally grave approach of performers of Judeo-Spanish songs whose training is in early music — are not always echoed in the performance practice of native bearers of the tradition. Part of the mood in which the song is sung will depend on circumstances — a solitary mother performing household tasks or putting a child to sleep — a group of young women swinging on the large family *matexa* (outdoor swing) — women singing at a wedding or, as I mentioned, at a bingo game — an older, lonely informant singing into my microphone in her small apartment — the context will affect the way the song is sung.

The “trick” can be humorous or serious, depending on the story being told. The *romances* include several “trick” stories, among them *El Caballero burlado* (T6), sung to me by Hannah Pimienta of Tangiers, who knows complete or nearly complete versions of a large number of ballads. In this song, the young woman sets out from France, and meets a knight. She parries his advances by saying that she is a charcoal seller’s daughter (or, in the Eastern Mediterranean, a leprous king’s daughter) and that she brings bad luck with her; when they reach Paris she laughs and says she is really the princess of Castile. The story ends with a happy marriage.

## MELODY 11. *El Caballero burlado*.

Gently  
Rubato

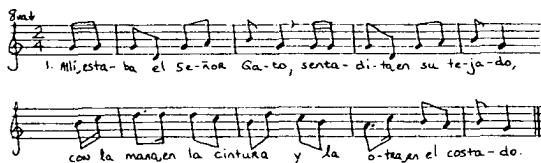
1. De Fran-cia partió la ni-ña, de Fran-cia la bien gua-ri-da,  
partie-ra para Pa-rís, donde pa-dre y madre re-ri-a-a.

The last example I will quote here is the song *Don Gato* (Mr. Cat), well-known in pan-Hispanic cultures, often as a children’s song. It describes, in lugubriously humorous detail, the funeral of a cat. In my collection, it is sung by the same two cousins who sang the version of



“So says the bride” described above; they didn’t quite make it through the song because they were laughing so hard. From Mr. Levy I learned that it is traditional to sing this song, of all seemingly unlikely choices, on *Tisha Be’Av*, an extremely solemn fast day which commemorates the destruction of the Temple. Certain ballads which overtly have nothing to do with these events are sung on this day and only this day; they are known as *endechas*, an old word for “lament.” *Don Gato* is sung, with a sad expression, all the way through, for “if you laugh on *Tisha Be’av* you will weep on *Rosh Hashanah*” (New Year).

#### MELODY 12. *Don Gato*.



The categories suggested here are not intended as definitive, rather as a convenient way of beginning to classify and describe this somewhat neglected aspect of Judeo-Spanish song. In my opinion, the humour in performance practice and in satire and parodies, as well as in the double-entendres (and even the “single entendres”!) of the bawdy texts — is a strong indication of the creative force of this community. Though the repertoire conserves song texts going back centuries, it has never been static, but has from its very beginnings drawn deeply on the culture of the host country. The ability to draw so widely on surrounding cultures and to poke fun at oneself while retaining such strong pride in one’s origins and traditions remains part of the vitality of the Sephardic community, in Canada as well as in the many world centres they are part of today.

#### Note on Pronunciation

In general, standard Castilian, orthography is used. The following exceptions to it should be noted:

- j: sz as in French “je”, not the modern Castilian guttural
- c before i and e is not lisped, but pronounced as an unvoiced s
- ħ is a guttural as in Scottish loch.

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## NOTES

1. This is a much-revised form of a paper given at the Popular Culture Association Meeting in Toronto, 1984.
2. For an update on recent research, see Armistead 1987.
3. For the background of this Canadian Sephardic community, see Cohen 1982.
4. Ballad reference numbers refer to Armistead 1978.
5. GERINELDO is a Montreal-based performing group founded in 1981 by Dr. Oro Anahory-Librowicz, a native of Tetuan, Morocco. The group consists of three Moroccan-born Sephardic Jews, plus myself, of Ashkenzai (East European) origin. GERINELDO's repertoire is based on songs from Dr. Anahory-Librowicz's extensive field collection, with several additions from my own.
6. For a full description and analysis of the text see Anahory Librowicz 1980: 58-60.
7. This and following songs (except for Melody 8) are from Col. J. Cohen.
8. Weich-Shahaq 1979-80: 87.
9. For the Eastern Mediterranean Judeo-Spanish birth song, see Weich Shahaq, 1982/3.
10. I am indebted to Dr. Jacob Hassan of the Arias Montano Institute for his allowing me full access to the Archives on several occasions.
11. Quoted in Fernea 1977:89.

*Resumé: L'aspect léger du repertoire traditionnelle judéo-espagnole a été négligé, la plupart des chercheurs ayant préféré d'étudier les genres plus sérieux. Pourtant, il existe un corpus fascinant de chansons coniques ou tout simplement joyeuses. Basé sur la collection de chansons que l'auteur a enregistrées à Montréal et à Toronto, cet article présente le matériel selon quatre catégories provisoires: (1) chansons grivoises, (2) chansons joyeuses rituelles, (3) parodies et satires et (4) autres. Ces catégories sont envisagées comme un premier étape vers une enquête plus détaillée.*