

# Re-Making Kinship. From Community to Family A Sephardic Experience in France

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Volume 24, numéro 2, 2016

Construction des identités religieuses : hommage à Jean Duhaime

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050503ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050503ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculté de théologie et de sciences des religions, Université de Montréal

ISSN

1188-7109 (imprimé)

1492-1413 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Roda, J. (2016). Re-Making Kinship. From Community to Family: A Sephardic Experience in France. *Théologiques*, 24(2), 97–120.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050503ar>

Résumé de l'article

Les Juifs séfarades (ou Judéo-espagnols) vivant en France, qui utilisent le judéo-espagnol comme langue d'héritage, sont un groupe diasporique assimilé, ayant été témoin de la guerre et de la marginalisation. Avec la croissance des recherches généalogiques dans nos sociétés occidentales libérales, de nombreux Séfarades judéo-espagnols, en quête de leur héritage perdu, réactualisent la mémoire de leurs ancêtres en développant des relations de parenté symbolique avec des individus partageant une filiation commune. Cette réactualisation mémorielle se concrétise principalement au sein d'un espace communautaire servant de lieu de consolidation de la parenté grâce au partage collectif d'un patrimoine musical spécifique. Ce phénomène nous oblige à examiner la tension entre les systèmes de parenté dit traditionnel — incarnés dans la lignée matrilineaire dans le cas de l'identité juive halakhique — et la parenté symbolique ancrée dans l'idée de « famille choisie », repenser la parenté à la croisée de ses dimensions biologiques et culturelles ainsi qu'à reconsidérer les débats anthropologiques actuels sur la religion pensée au-delà de la pratique religieuse.

# Re-Making Kinship. From Community to Family

## A Sephardic Experience in France

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### The Scene of Arrival: In Search of Belonging and Legitimacy

17 november 2010, Los Angeles, Sephardic<sup>1</sup> Film Festival:

That night, some individuals were wearing a *kippah*, others a star of David around their neck, some women displayed their religiousness by respecting Judaism's codes of modesty while others displayed nothing specific that

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1. The Sephardic people here refer to the people who identify as descendants of the Jews expelled from the Spain in 1492. They were then displaced to regions across the Mediterranean, and significantly in the Ottoman Empire. After their expulsion, they maintained cultural and linguistic elements from their place of origin in the Iberian Peninsula, including the Judeo-Spanish language. Their presence in France dates from the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. In France, before 1950-1960, they defined themselves as Sephardi or Sephardim. It was only in the aftermath of decolonization, with the immigration of Jews from North Africa who defined themselves as Sephardic (Séfarade), that Judeo-Spanish speakers created a new ethnic category in French: Judéo-espagnol. Their aim was to differentiate themselves from the North African Jewry that did not experience the same history and did not have the same culture. However, in this paper, I have decided to follow the English use Sephardic to define them. Thus, this article will refer to my fieldwork in France with the Judeo-Spanish speaking world of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Balkans and Levant.

could identify them as (being) Jewish. There were eight of us discussing the history of the Sephardic people, and more particularly the question of belonging as revealed in the documentary we had just watched. This was the Brazilian documentary *About Sugarcane and Homecoming* (Kesslassi 2008) which tells the story of a congregation in the north eastern part of Brazil that follows traditional Jewish religious rites and practices, as well as Jewish family and communal life. These people define themselves as Jewish despite being descents of «New Christians» and they are not recognized by the Jewish establishment, which is asking them to convert<sup>2</sup>. This documentary provoked a debate regarding «authentic», «real» and legitimate belonging. Two main discourses emerged from our discussion. Some envisaged this Brazilian experience as «exceptional» because these individuals came back to their lost heritage after forced conversion to Christianity and now practice Orthodox Judaism, respecting its social norms. Others, however, thought that they were not legitimate because, according to Jewish law, they cannot trace the entire genealogy, and more particularly the Jewishness, of their mothers. After the focus on the film, we addressed the question of family background. Joseph's life story reflected the issue of biological belonging. He started by explaining that his mother is not biologically Jewish. She was born Catholic, but was adopted and raised by a Sephardic family. His father, however, was of Sephardic descent. While Joseph considered himself Sephardic, some of the others in the group questioned this claim as he was born to a mother who was not biologically Jewish. Joseph later told me that he was obsessed with finding «Jewish blood» in his matrilineal descent so that he could justify his inclusion and be accepted as a total «insider» in this group. He explained to me that, for most people, it seemed that biological kinship was much more important than his mother's social experience.

The issue raised that night with Joseph's experience and the Brazilian documentary about biological versus social legitimate belonging reflects a broader issue rooted in the sacralization of biological kinship, blood and genetics that is often observed in our Western society to create a sense of belonging to a nation, a community, a group or a family around the world. For instance, in recent years, international DNA testing companies have contributed to an increase in individual genealogical research around the

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2. To know more about the documentary: <[ruthfilms.com/films/docs/jewish/about-sugarcane-and-homecoming.html](http://ruthfilms.com/films/docs/jewish/about-sugarcane-and-homecoming.html)> and <[idfa.nl/en/film/23cea1cb-3525-42cb-ac43-60b0d7aee21a/about-sugarcane-and-homecoming/docs-for-sale](http://idfa.nl/en/film/23cea1cb-3525-42cb-ac43-60b0d7aee21a/about-sugarcane-and-homecoming/docs-for-sale)>.

world, which is being used by individuals to justify racial, ethnic and religious descent. In addition, most nation states still use biological kinship in attributing citizenship.

In the case of several religious groups and religious identities, this attachment to lineage is commonly expressed as « authenticity » (Moisa 2013). The idea of being born within a religious tradition is sometimes perceived as a « more authentic » experience of the religion. Like many religious communities where a specific language, culture and ethnicity are intertwined with religious identity (Cantwell Smith 1991 ; Despland 1999 ; Ngonbri 2013), the idea of being a « real », « authentic » Sephardic person is embodied in lineage and, as defined by Jewish law, it is matrilineal-based<sup>3</sup>. However, even if what Joseph described reflects the preoccupation of many individuals in our Western society regarding biologic kinship and blood (Schneider 1980 ; Wilson 2016), it still remains that this reality is constantly being challenged by the social and cultural reality of how people create and maintain kinship ties, notably in the context of our post-modern and super-diverse (Vertovec 2007) societies. Indeed, on the one hand we observe a strong embodiment of kinship with blood and biology (Schneider 1980), but on the other hand, LGBTQ rights movements around the world are creating new possibilities regarding kinship, based on the possibility of choice, such as Kath Weston suggested with the idea of the « family we choose » through her studies of gay and lesbian families (Weston 1991).

The Sephardic communities<sup>4</sup> and families speaking Judeo-Spanish to whom Joseph refers and that I followed over several years in France are a telling example with which to examine this complex tension between « traditional » kinship systems — embodied in the symbolic of blood — and social kinship anchored in the idea of the « chosen family » that transcend the usual understanding of family. This analysis is based on findings from research I conducted in France between 2007 and 2013, where individuals whom I interviewed defined themselves as *Judéo-espagnol* (in French) and recounted to me, as Joseph similarly did in Los Angeles, a quest for identity. Of note is that many of the people I met in these Jewish cultural associations were not strictly Jewish, in that their mothers were not neces-

3. According to rabbinical law, since the second century, the transmission of Jewish identity has been matrilineal (see Cohen 1985).

4. Here I employ the plural to talk about the Sephardic community as they are organized into several cultural associations. The idea is also to emphasize the plurality of Sephardic life and to define them as a non-heterogeneous group.

sarily Jewish, or that they were born of mixed parentage<sup>5</sup>. Many of the individuals that now compose the Sephardic community originally from the Ottoman Empire (who uses Judeo-Spanish as their language heritage) in France are the result of French assimilation, mixed marriage and modernity.

This example is particularly meaningful for anthropological research on kinship and religion because it shows how — despite observing the breakdown and redefinition of family in our so-called modern liberal societies — the desire to create ties among individuals can be expressed through new forms of kinship relationships, where a return to religious practices experienced by ancestors, then perceived as cultural, becomes particularly relevant for a specific group or individuals. Indeed, so far, the revival of kinship has, for anthropologists, primarily focused on the so-called « traditional » life experiences of minority groups or on the LGBTQ community and new reproductive technologies. Too little is known about what happens to individuals and groups, especially to religious and ethnic minorities, who have experienced a rupture of social descent in the aftermath of war, assimilation or repression.

This ethnography of cultural and social life of Sephardim living in France, using Judeo-Spanish as their heritage language, that I am presenting here identifies the specific social and cultural strategies used by assimilated groups to reclaim legacies and thus consolidate their genealogies, which are intertwined with their sense of belonging. This paper puts forward the reflection anthropologists made on kinship after Schneider's critics of the sacralization of biology (1980). We will discover a process in which kinship ties are motivated by biological kinship and more precisely a choice of filiation, then consolidated by a social kinship echoing the concept of « chosen family » that Weston (1991) developed investigating gay and lesbian families. This consolidation of kinship ties happened in a cultural community thanks to the emotional experience of sharing a common heritage. Thus, the discussion goes further the dichotomy between biology and social kinship and nourish a balanced perspective to rethink kinship in the present, interpretation suggested by Wilson (2016) who encourages the reintegration of bio-essentialism in the field. It is by being inspired by the work of anthropologist working on kinship after the critique of Schneider such as Weston (1991), Marilyn Strathern (1992), Marshal Sahlins (2011), and more recently Naomi Leite (2017), that I

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5. Here I define mix-marriage as a marriage in which one spouse is non-Jewish or non-Sephardic.

began to examine Sephardic kinship through cultural heritage and social practices beyond blood.

Looking at how religious and ethnic groups create kinship ties through a shared cultural heritage is a fairly new area of research (Leite 2005; 2017; Graburn 2001). Anthropologists have defined kinship ties as an element that constructs a sense of belonging to a religious community. However, in the case of the Sephardic community in France, one is more likely to observe the process in reverse, that is to say that it is the desire to reconnect with lost memory and heritage, expressed through cultural and religious practices, that is creating kinship ties among individuals.

In fact, the establishment of the France's Sephardic community, originally from the Ottoman Empire and Morocco, in the xx<sup>th</sup> century is similar to what several other religious and ethnic minorities went through arriving in France at that time: these communities abandoned their cultural and religious practices in order to move toward a more secular, modern way of life. At the same time, a revival movement in the 1960s and a new wave of immigration of Jews from North Africa, non Judeo-Spanish speakers, led to a renewed interest by France's Sephardic community from the Ottoman Empire in their lost culture and practices. Indeed, within the assimilation into French society (Benveniste 1989; Bahloul 2017), these individuals chose to strengthen their heritage by investigating their « origins » and creating community spaces where they could share the cultural practices of their ancestors. Here, amongst other cultural practices, music<sup>6</sup> played an especially important role because it was seen by Sephardim as something that could easily be transportable among the diaspora. It also defined the practices that represented *par excellence* the traces that Sephardim preserved from medieval times in Spain<sup>7</sup> thanks to the performance of the Judeo-Spanish language. However, what is the purpose for Sephardim of investigating their ancestors to define personhood in the present? Why do Sephardic Jews originally from the Ottoman Empire in France seek to construct their present in relation to a nostalgic past

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6. In this paper, Sephardic music refers to secular songs in Judeo-Spanish, not to the repertoire in Hebrew.
  7. The Sephardic music repertoire represents the preservation from medieval times in Spain. However, there is confusion between the melody and the text. Indeed, even if we can trace literary links between Sephardic songs in Judeo-Spanish and the text from the medieval times, it is not the case for the melodies. Ethnomusicologists have shown that this links regarding the melodies (the music) is a social construction, almost mythical.

anchored in genealogy, and how do they proceed to re-enact this past in the present? More specifically, how is *Sephardicness*, marked by *Frenchification*<sup>8</sup> (Bahloul 2017), ruptures of war and omissions, reintegrated into the life experience of individuals and families?

Such questions emerged as a result of my immersion and participation in Sephardic life as practiced in various cultural associations<sup>9</sup>, in Paris (Vidas Largas, Aki Estamos, Ak Syete), Marseille (Vidas Largas Marseille) and Lyon (Vidas Largas Lyon), as well as actively participating in the Sephardic musical scene in France where, from 2007 to 2013, I closely followed 18 professional singers and musicians, including Françoise Atlan, Sandra Bessis, Stella Gutman, Hélène Obadia and Marlène Samoun. In addition to the ethnography I conducted of Sephardic life of Judeo-Spanish speakers in France, either through the lens of associative life or musical performances, I also interviewed over 50 people living in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, and I had the chance to collaborate with associations for the development of their musical programming and cultural activities, as well as with artists for concert-conferences. Beyond this multi-sited ethnography in France, I have also done comparative fieldworks in Los Angeles and Tel-Aviv, two cities where Sephardic people from the Ottoman Empire established communities in the xx<sup>th</sup> century. Comparing the experience in France with the one in the United States and Israel has allowed me to refine my understanding of French specificity, notably regarding the experience of assimilation and mixed marriage seen in France, as well as to better understand kinship ties beyond the national border (see Roda 2016).

In this paper, I will begin to answer the questions listed above by exploring how *Sephardicness* was re-introduced, from the revival movement (1960) to our time, into the French landscape, both in the community and the family, via cultural and, more specifically, musical heritage. I will show how performance functions as a tool for individuals and groups to

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8. The anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul has suggested the concept of *Frenchification* to refer to the adoption of French cultural norms and habits by Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish/Ladino speakers, which has primarily affected language usage and practices. This phenomenon occurs in the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> among Jewish communities from the Ottoman Empire and North Africa via the access to secular education in French public schools and in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.
  9. I interviewed around 70 people in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Tel-Aviv, Los Angeles and Montreal. Even if my fieldwork was a multi-sited ethnography in France, I have also done comparative fieldwork in Los Angeles and Israel in order to refine my understanding of French specificity.

construct, transmit and represent their *Sephardicness* and their sense of belonging to it. As anthropologist Nelson Graburn (2001) explains, the concept of heritage is fundamentally linked to the cultural domain of kinship and its concepts of descent and inheritance. Following Sahlins, musical practice and performance can be understood as an experience of « mutuality of being » (Sahlins 2011)<sup>10</sup>, which manifests itself in genealogical matters and is then expressed as a relational network between people and groups of people who see themselves as united. Here I draw on the vocabulary of kinship to describe the relationships among members of the community as people tell us how they feel essentially connected to others, as typically conveyed through musical performance. In the same way that anthropologist Naomi Leite showed in her ethnographic research on Portuguese *Marranos* (2017), I will argue that cultural association constitutes Sephardic kinship in the present. However, unlike the *Marranos* in Portugal, Sephardim from French associations base their kinship on descent and experience, and express it through care, affinity and sense of belonging within the association. As Leite (2017) reminds us, « in practice, relatedness is never entirely given; kin connections may arise and disappear, and there are multiple modalities beyond descent and alliance through which people become kin (Cannell 2013; Carsten 2004; Weston 1991) ». Thus, kinship is recognized in our descent and alliance, our expressions and choices, but also in emotion and actions. To explore these issues, I have chosen to focus on the activity of the Parisian association *Aki Estamos* and, in particular, the performance of the group *Presensya* at the *European Day of Jewish Culture*, a particularly popular and powerful event that can be considered a window into Jewish culture in all European countries. Before discussing how cultural associations serve to consolidate *Sephardicness*, in the first part of the article I will explain how and why individuals join the cultural association, which will summarise Sephardic history from the Ottoman Empire in France. In this first section, I will also explain how the process involves complex renegotiations of kinship, religious and cultural practices, as well as, more generally, notions of belonging.

10. The concept of « mutuality of being » was first proposed by Stasch (2009) in his analysis of Korowai kinship in Papua New Guinea, a term that Sahlins (2011; 2013) later adopted to characterize a broad range of human cultural forms of kinship in its more inclusive sense. With this concept, the anthropologist was trying to critique and summarize a voluminous literature on kinship that notably includes the tension between conception of kinship as biological and social (Wilson 2016).



## A Repentance Towards Sephardic Life

During the first half of the xx<sup>th</sup> century, many Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire immigrated to France. Indeed, the collapse of the Empire, the process of modernization, and the rapprochement with France's culture and language through a network of French language Jewish schools in Arab lands (*School of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*) (Rodrigue et Carnaud 1989) encouraged several individuals and families to leave the Ottoman Empire for France as a new land of welcome. Upon their arrival, like most ethno-religious groups at the time, their way of life was challenged by secular French society as they were pressured to assimilate into the « French nation ». After the Second World War, entire Sephardic families were shattered, and a return to everyday life took place at the margins of Jewish religious life and activities. At this time, there was an increase in the number of mixed marriages and in the adoption of French first and last names (personal interview and ethnography with the association), the two main components for passing on Sephardic descent. The result was a fragmentation of descent, leading to the non-transmission of culture, language and religious practices (Sephiha 1979; Benveniste 1989; Benbassa 1996; Benbassa et Rodrigue 2002; Bornes Varol 2013). However, in the 1980s, several individuals with Sephardic descent in France (from the second and third generations) aspired to reconnect with their past and the world that had been lost as a result of assimilation, modernization, displacement and war (Roda 2011; 2014). What I could observe thanks to written and oral sources collected from my ethnographic research reveals a gradual shift from a matrilineal traditional kinship system to a cognatic system, where the figure of the Jewish mother passing on Jewish descent is surprisingly not central for the experience of *Sephardicness*. In fact, the experience of sharing a common lost heritage leads individuals with common ancestry to share time, emotions and sounds, that reaffirms kinship ties among them.

I would now like to turn directly to the voice of Keren Esther, a Sephardic singer that I met in 2011 at the *Université d'été judéo-espagnole* (Judeo-Spanish Summer School) organized by the cultural association *Aki Estamos* in Paris. Esther offers a clear sense of the issues that Sephardim face in their quest for identity and belonging:

At the age of 40, I was in search of an identity. I felt my Sephardic roots deeply, but at the same time, it was hard to connect with this part of who I was because I did not have any knowledge of it. I found a book written by my grandfather who told his history in Judeo-Spanish. This discovery was an intimate cataclysm

because it gave me such an indication of this past life for which I was so nostalgic. [...] it was a kind of missing piece of the puzzle. I was able to reconstruct a whole universe and images that I had not received. [...] With my family, there was a history that I did not fully understand; through music, I discovered this history, learned about it, and connected with this past in order to connect with this lost world, family and the people who belong to it. (Keren Esther, interview 2014)

Here, Esther reveals her deep desire to connect with her Sephardic past and how this part of her family history had been kept from her. However, knowing that this desire was more than intellectual, one situated more so in the embodiment of emotion and feeling, music became a special tool for her which enabled this search for identity and belonging. I encountered many similar examples during my research in France. Many people of second or third generation Sephardic descent from Ottoman Empire in France grew up in the French public school system, submerged in mainstream « French culture » with almost no reference to their Sephardic heritage. The desire for connection to this otherwise hidden and ignored heritage, which typically emerged during a discovery of new information about one's family history, often brought about by a desire to know more about one's genealogy and ancestral history. This discovery of Sephardic ancestral history from the Ottoman Empire often led the individuals I have met and interviewed to join cultural associations such as *Aki Estamos*. In such a context, cultural practices play an important role in the creation of kinship ties for Sephardim that had been assimilated and had lost their traditional kinship system. Indeed, their kinship system reflects what Godelier, Trautman and Tjon Sie Fat already concluded in 1998: the disappearance of a kin-based system structured on marriage classes, clans and rituals such as the Sephardim experienced in the Ottoman Empire. More specifically, this association, which acts as a community space, gives a central role to musical performance in revitalizing Sephardic life.

I define the process experienced by Esther and many other members of *Aki Estamos*, as a *teshuva* identity, repentance or « return » toward Sephardic life from the Ottoman Empire (Gross *et al.* 2011), of which the primary objective is to re-introduce and then transmit a sense of belonging among people who share common ancestors through embodied experiences that combine cultural and religious elements. One can observe *teshuva* practices in the pictures below, where children learn songs in the Judeo-Spanish language for *Purim* (Figure 1), in the context of a summer school (Figure 2), adult (Figure 3) and young adult (Figure 4) following culinary recipes during workshop, and kids experiencing *Hanukkah* in the

«Sephardic spirit» (Figure 5). However, surprisingly, this transmission of a sense of belonging largely comes about through a process of experiencing and embodying the past as manifested by artists, often outsiders to the community, performing heritage music. These artists typically perform in public and community spaces to which they do not originally belong<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 1: Children learn songs in the Judeo-Spanish language for *Purim* party organized by *Aki Estamos*, April 16, 2014. Copyright: Lucille Caballero for *Aki Estamos*.



Figure 2: Children learn songs in the Judeo-Spanish language in the context of the Judeo-Spanish summer school organized by *Aki Estamos*, July 11, 2013. Copyright: Can Sariçoban for *Aki Estamos*.

11. As Waligorska (2013) has demonstrated, we also observed similar trends in Poland and Germany via the performance of Klezmer music.



*Figure 3: Adult following culinary Sephardic recipes from the Ottoman Empire at the Judeo-Spanish summer school organized by Aki Estamos, July 11, 2013. Copyright: Can Sariçoban for Aki Estamos.*



*Figure 4: Young Adult following culinary Sephardic recipes from the Ottoman Empire, February 11, 2014. Copyright: Dany Simon for Aki Estamos.*



Figure 5: Children experiencing *Hanukkah* in the “Sephardic spirit”, December 4, 2010. Copyright Lucille Caballero for Aki Estamos.

### Aki Estamos: A Space to Experience the Belonging

The revival of Sephardic life from the Ottoman Empire in France is taking place through cultural associations. These associations organize events so that people of Sephardic descent can gather together and learn about their common ancestry, languages and culture, and then ultimately transmit this new knowledge to their families. The most active and well-known centre in France is the association *Aki Estamos*, founded in 1998 in Paris by a group of individuals sharing common Sephardic descent from Turkey and Greece. Looking at the association’s website (<<http://www.sefaradinfo.org/>>), we discover a dynamic virtual space that highlights a variety of activities: the celebration of family meals at major holidays such as *Purim*, *Hanukkah* and *Pesach*, with particular attention placed on the Sephardic *minhag* (tradition) from the Ottoman Empire, a mixed choir led by artist Marlene Samoun, cooking workshops for children and adults, as well as information related to Sephardic families, genealogies and histories from the former Ottoman Empire.

*Aki Estamos* has come a long way since its founding in 1998. Its success is certainly due to the focus on the transmission of Sephardic cultural heritage:

The mission of AKI ESTAMOS — *Association des Amis de la Lettre Sépharade* — is to ensure the promotion of cultural heritage from Sephardic



communities of the former Ottoman Empire. The association brings together Sephardic families from Turkey, the Balkans, Western Europe, the countries of the Mediterranean region and their friends. [...] Since its origin, the aim has been to experience this culture in the present within a tradition of inclusivity and to ensure its transmission. (Jenny Laneurie-Fresco, *Aki Estamos* President)<sup>12</sup>

The activities organized around Sephardic life focus mainly on language, cooking and music, ideally as acts to be performed in day-to-day life. For the members of the association, these three cultural aspects are essential to defining Sephardic identity and are closely intertwined with one another. The organization makes it explicit that its main goal is for Sephardic heritage to prosper in France. As François Azar, the vice-president and main spokesperson, states on the website:

As the generation born in the former Ottoman Empire inevitably disappears and Judeo-Spanish speakers become increasingly rare, we need to ensure the transmission of our heritage to the younger generation. Indeed, we cannot be satisfied with the excellent academic work completed in recent decades, nor the proliferation of commemorative cultural and artistic events. We also need Sephardic culture in our everyday life, so that we can share it simply within our families, much like our ancestors did. (François Azar)<sup>10</sup>

Here, Azar emphasizes the importance of transmission not only to the younger generation but also within the family, an idea that many members share. In a personal interview that I conducted with Raymond (one member that is close with the board of the association), he explained that the association seeks to consolidate kinship ties among individuals who share a sense of belonging and to reintegrate this sense within the family. In that regard, Raymond has an interesting family history, which helps us understand how a sense of belonging can challenge the traditional transmission of Jewish identity that operates through matrilineal rules<sup>13</sup>, something that

12. Voir <[sefaradinfo.org/Home/qui-sommes-nous](http://sefaradinfo.org/Home/qui-sommes-nous)> (all translations by author unless otherwise noted).

13. It is important to mention that beyond the transmission of Jewish identity via matrilineal rules, the Judaic kinship system is patrilineal (Bahloul 2017). In this perspective, the father transmits religious, cultural and social contents of the identity. In that sense, someone with a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father will still carry the name of his father and inherits from him some religious status (if the father is a Cohen for instance). This traditional transmission of identity applies to the *halakhic* law followed by Orthodox and Conservative/Massorti communities, which consider a person Jewish only if born to a Jewish mother. This is contrary to Reform Judaism,

is the norms among French Jews<sup>14</sup>. His mother is Catholic, from Brittany, while his father was born in France of Sephardic parents originally from Turkey. According to *halakha* (Jewish law), Raymond is not Jewish. Like many of my research participants, irrespective of generational positioning, Raymond grew up in an entirely secular environment steeped in France's national culture and language. For his parents, religion stood in stark opposition to a modern and liberal view of the world. As he explained, he did not inherit any Jewish or Sephardic culture from his parents. It was his desire to reconnect with his Sephardic ancestors and to pass it on to his children that led him to participate in the *Aki Estamos* association. Other members of the association with whom I spoke and collaborated similarly explained that they felt a need to reconnect with a past world related to their heritage, and they did so through the activities related to learning and practicing the cultural elements offered by the association. Such experiences, I was told by many of the members, brought about a sense of belonging to a descent group, a community acting sometimes as a family. Raymond explained how his grandparents felt about his parents' mix marriage:

Even if, for my grandparents, Judaism did not seem important, this marriage [between his Sephardic father and Catholic mother from Brittany] was certainly a shock for them as it would alter the Sephardic descent. [...] I know that my grandparents had only Sephardic friends [from the Ottoman Empire], and for them I could imagine that it was something difficult because it was a rupture. However, they tried to maintain the heritage through me. Indeed, I am the only man, thus the only one who keeps the typically Sephardic name [from the Ottoman Empire]. Even if my mother was not Jewish, I was still part of the family lineage thanks to the family name. (Raymond, October 2015)

Here, Raymond reveals how his grandparents envisioned transmitting Jewish identity beyond the Jewish law of matrilineality and the importance of the family name related to patrilineal rules, to connect this belonging to Sephardic identity. Moreover, Raymond's wife is also non-Jewish. This, however, did not prevent him from enrolling his kids in a Jewish school

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which considers a person Jewish if the father is Jewish. Regarding the construction of Jewishness, see Cohen (1999).

14. In France, the liberal movements that accept patrilineal descent to define Jewish identity is at the margin and extremely dissenting. The Jewish institution is in majority orthodox, strictly respecting Halakha.

and from feeling a strong sense of belonging to his heritage and being accepted as such by the rest of the community and his Jewish family.

As my ethnography shows, participating in the life of a cultural association in order to consolidate, express and experience a sense of belonging to Sephardic heritage is particularly relevant in the areas of cooking, language and music. However, music holds a unique status and value for the people I have met and, more broadly, for the activities of the association. There are several reasons for this. First, music is a cultural element that serves to express the lost language and often accompanies food preparation, thereby embodying the two other key elements of cultural transmission. Second, it conjures up imagination of and nostalgia for the past as both an intellectual *and* an embodied experience, hence providing multi-sensory stimulation (vision, hearing, smell and taste). Third, music transcends the boundaries of the secular and the religious which, in the case of the French experience, is particularly challenging given the debate on secularism and religion (Bauberot 1990; 2017). Also, knowing that the current mainstream Jewish community in France is particularly linked with religious authorities and institutions, it might be a way to affirm this complex Jewish identity that transcends religious norms. As I describe in the next section, members of the association were also able to materialize their belonging to *Sephardicness* through musical performances as an activity in which emotions could more easily be shared with people from different backgrounds.

### **From Representation to Transmission or the power of music**

The performance of Sephardic music in Judeo-Spanish language in France is done mainly in two spaces: the general public space and the community space. The general public space was originally developed in tandem with the revivalist movement of the 1960s, and then, in a more pronounced way, at the beginning of the 1980s with the development of various « world music/art » scenes, which progressively promoted Sephardic music that, until then, mainly focused on the realm of the intimate and the community. In this space, professional artists who perform a Judeo-Spanish repertoire are invited to join « world music/art » scenes. The goal of such events is to promote peace, deconstruct conflicts and encourage « living together » (Roda 2014). The interest and popularity of Sephardic music within the world music/art scene have encouraged many Sephardim to reconnect with their lost past through music. Within associations such as



*Aki Estamos*, professional artists, who originally performed for the general public, were gradually invited over time to perform for the community. Since the 2000s, and much more regularly since François Azar became the Vice-President of the association (around 2010), *Aki Estamos* has been inviting artists as well as ethnomusicologists to their festivals, concerts, festivities, cooking and music workshops, and their yearly summer university as well.

Drawing on Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* (1973), we can conceive of such performances as a place for social interaction and thus, a means to better understand how members of the association connect with each other, the artists (Roda 2016) and, most notably, their cultural heritage. Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life* (1973) concerning human relationships has indeed been integrated into the field of *performance studies* (Bonnerave 2007, 120). By retaining Goffman's notion and applying it to staged performances, researchers in *performance studies* have taken into consideration the fact that a performance integrates the social values of a society and implicitly those demanded by the public. It is therefore the relationship between the producer and the listener, reflecting the societal system in which they live, that is expressed by the performance. The actor has rules to respect according to his environment (context) and the audience. In musical anthropology and ethnomusicology, Burckhardt Qureshi (1987, 2007) established this principle developed within performance studies based on Goffman's work. According to her, every musical performance is unique and interrelated to the interaction and simultaneous presence between those who produce and those who receive the performance (Burckhardt Qureshi 1987, 2007). It involves understanding how this interaction is part of the performance as well as its musical, cultural and social significance. Musical performance is therefore a social action created by all the actors (producer and listener) and influenced by the space in which the event takes place. It is therefore by following the social and cultural approach to performance that I envisage the analysis of the spaces of practice that showcase the Sephardic musical heritage.

I would like now to focus on a telling example: the performance of the group *Presensya*<sup>15</sup>, which was organized by *Aki Estamos* in September 2009 for the *European Day of Jewish Culture* at the *Alliance Israélite*

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15. The group consists of the singer Hélène Obadia, the guitarist Vidal Isaïa, and the percussionist David Bruley but that day they invited Véronique Roth as a guest artist.

*Universelle de Paris*. The group's guitarist Isaïa Vidal, percussionist David Bruley, and singer Hélène Obadia appear on stage with a surprise guest: the accordionist Véronique Roth. The stage is positioned at the same level as the audience. The singer is standing in the middle of the stage, and the other musicians are seated around her. Hélène Obadia wears a long, elegant, dark green skirt and a light green blouse with long, flowing sleeves. A ribbon in her hair gently cascades down her neck. She is adorned with a necklace and large earrings. Hélène's outfit recalls the garments of medieval Spain. The three musicians wear conventional and relaxed clothing. Hélène's position on stage and her resplendent outfit, compared to those of the musicians, reinforce her central role in the performance.

A unique moment occurred when the group performed Flory Jagoda's piece, *Ocho kandelikas*, and the song *Kuando el Rey Nimrod*. During the performance, most of the audience sang along with Hélène and clapped their hands to the beat. For *Ocho kandelikas*, audience members sang, clapped to the beat, swayed to the music, and held up their fingers as they counted the number of candles mentioned in each verse: «*una kandelika, dos kandelikas, tres kandelikas, quatro kandelikas, sintyu kandelikas, sej kandelikas, syete kandelikas, ocho kandelas para mi*» («one little candle, two little candles... eight candles for me»). The performance ended with a standing ovation, loud and enthusiastic applause, and repeated shouts of «Bravo!». After the musicians took their first bow, the audience yelled out for a performance of «Adyo Querida». Hélène gladly accepted to perform this last song. While she sang the refrain, the audience sang along with much enthusiasm.

Throughout the performance, I observed the active participation of the audience as they sang and swayed to the music, chattered enthusiastically with one another, smiled and interacted with the artists on stage. The interaction and dialogue that occur between the artists and the audience facilitated the transmission and reception of the songs. Such performances confirm the exchange of knowledge from musicians to audience members (Roda 2011). It clearly contributed to the audience's process of learning the repertoire, allowing members of the association to reconnect with a lost past and to share a warm and loving moment among people who care for each other and are experiencing a similar quest for identity. These musical practices seemingly help build caring among the members of the association as they (re)claim their sense of belonging to a community that embodies certain characteristics of the family and, in turn, pass on this *Sephardicness* at home. The participation of the audience confirmed the

success of the event. For the artists, these moments of sharing and communicating with the community are extremely significant because they not only validate their art, but also legitimize their performance of Sephardic heritage. To be recognized as artists of the Sephardic musical tradition, they need to forge a relationship with members of the community, who express their agreement, disagreement, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance. The active participation of audience members through words, gestures, clapping and singing serves to validate their involvement with the performers.

At the end of the performance, a special « *Verre de l'amitié* » (« glass of good cheer ») was served with *raki* (alcohol) and *borekas* (stuffed pastries) to members of the community and other people in the audience, myself included. In speaking with one another, we expressed a sense of care and love through a friendly exchange of words and hugs. If I were in search of belonging to a family and a community, my search would have been fulfilled through this exchange of mutual connection that we shared during and after the performance.

By presenting traditional secular songs that express a lost language and the lost worlds of a daily Sephardic life prior to immigration to France, the artistic performance described here enable members of the association to materialize their mutual *sephardicness* through the experience of singing together, telling stories, and sharing knowledge with people who have come to care for each other. During and after these performances, this common *sephardicness* is embodied through an exchange of emotion as well as sounds, eye contact, touch, words and stories related to the shared past. During the event, it can be argued that the singer embodied the figure of the Sephardic mother who transmits secular cultural heritage to the next generation. This is undeniably the mother's role within the Sephardic imagination. From this perspective, it is no accident that most singers are women and thus, the centre of attention. Thanks to this « symbolic mother » embodied by the singer, members learn the songs while they sing along with the singer and then have the opportunity to reinterpret them at home.

Even if members of the community did not grow up in a religious, Sephardic cultural environment, I did observe some traces of the so-called « traditional » kinship system, particularly in regard to hierarchical structures. As such, while the women transmit the knowledge, cultural heritage and values associated with the secular sphere, the men remain in charge of liturgical practices. Moreover, these generational power dynamics give

structure to the organization: the first generation of immigrants born in Turkey or Greece hold important power in the decision-making process. They act as the symbolic parent before the second and third generations born in France. The association, which is envisioned as a community space, similarly acts as a family space, where the function of each individual is regulated according to gender, age and generation.

Although the objectives of the public and community spaces are different, they are in fact intimately intertwined. On the one hand, public space aims to promote Sephardic culture and identity to a broader audience. On the other hand, community space enables Sephardim to consolidate their sense of belonging. Indeed, public space has encouraged them to create their own association and to select their own artists. This convergence of musical events plays a vital role in the revitalization of Sephardic life from the Ottoman Empire in France as well as the sense of being kin beyond matrilineality. Here is a diagram summarizing the process:

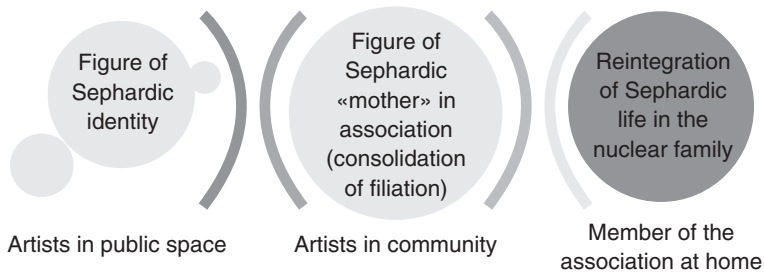


Figure 6: Sephardic Kinship Diagram.

### Concluding Thoughts: A Return to *Sephardicness* within the Family Space

The reflexion presented here on performance spaces highlights the importance of the relationship between artists and the community in consolidating Sephardic descent from the Ottoman Empire in the present through the embodiment of emotions, sounds, stories and words as shaped by the performance experience. This relationship defines public, community and family spaces as inter-relational, where each space has a specific purpose, but is dependent on the others, thereby facilitating the reintegration of *Sephardicness* in the life experience of individuals and families.

The family histories I have collected demonstrate that Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire, as a result of their assimilation into the mainstream liberal and secular society, have progressively desacralized marriage and

matrilineal *halakhic* Jewish descent. What surprised me was that the starting point for expressing this sense of belonging was a desire and active choice to connect with a specific descent, in other, the shutter is a biological kinship, a genealogical or blood element. The irony is that its materialization manifests itself through social and cultural experiences that transcend blood relationship, because the community space, where people are not kin related, then acts as a symbolic family. Indeed, the Sephardim whom I met — those who assimilate and come largely from mixed marriages (with non-Jews or with non-Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire) — chose the group to which they wanted to belong and pointed to their ancestry as the deciding factor. The experience of the traditional Sephardic family is reproduced through participation in the association. The members of the association constitute their kin in the present, allowing individuals to reintegrate cultural and social elements Sephardic life from the Ottoman Empire within their nuclear family (Roda 2018). In this context, it is the consolidation of descent that is expressed. This Sephardic experience in France follows the proposition made by Wilson (2016) and Shryock (2013) to reanalyse kinship both in its biological and cultural dimensions. As Jonathan Boyarin (2013) states, a kinship is, to be sure, not merely biological or « racial », but it is nevertheless inherited.

This fieldwork demonstrates the impact that the performance of cultural/religious identity can have on the public in relation to community and family spaces, as well as a space to create kinship ties, something that can be seen as parallel with what the anthropologist Erica Lehrer observed in the revival of Jewish culture in Poland (Lehrer 2013). One of the most telling aspects is that, beyond assimilation into French society as well as the rupture of the transmission of value and kinship systems characteristic of the Sephardic community from the Ottoman Empire, the relationships that artists maintain with community members, brought together in cultural associations, are conceived in terms of a deep-seated tradition of kinship.

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## Résumé

Les Juifs séfarades (ou Judéo-espagnols) vivant en France, qui utilisent le judéo-espagnol comme langue d'héritage, sont un groupe diasporique assimilé, ayant été témoin de la guerre et de la marginalisation. Avec la croissance des recherches généalogiques dans nos sociétés occidentales libérales, de nombreux Séfarades judéo-espagnols, en quête de leur héritage perdu, réactualisent la mémoire de leurs ancêtres en développant des relations de



parenté symbolique avec des individus partageant une filiation commune. Cette réactualisation mémorielle se concrétise principalement au sein d'un espace communautaire servant de lieu de consolidation de la parenté grâce au partage collectif d'un patrimoine musical spécifique. Ce phénomène nous oblige à examiner la tension entre les systèmes de parenté dit traditionnel — incarnés dans la lignée matrilineaire dans le cas de l'identité juive halakhique — et la parenté symbolique ancrée dans l'idée de « famille choisie », repenser la parenté à la croisée de ses dimensions biologiques et culturelles ainsi qu'à reconsidérer les débats anthropologiques actuel sur la religion pensée au-delà de la pratique religieuse.

## Abstract

*The Sephardic Jews living in France, who use Judeo-Spanish as their heritage language, are an assimilated diasporic group that has witnessed war, assimilation and marginalization. With the increase in genealogical research in Western Society, many Sephardim have experienced a process of revitalization of memory through kin relations with people of similar descent. This complex revitalization takes form within the structure of a community cultural centre which acts as a place for re-making kinship thanks to the emotional experience of sharing a specific musical heritage. This phenomenon forces us to examine the tension between «traditional» kinship systems — embodied in the matrilineal bloodline in the case of halakhic Jewish identity — and symbolic kinship anchored in the idea of a «chosen family», to rethink kinship as a mixture between biology and culture, as well as to reconsider current anthropological debates on religion thought beyond the strict religious practices.*