

**Isaac Jack LEVY and Rosemary LEVY ZUMWALT, eds.,
“Sephardic Folklore: Exile and Homecoming”, Jewish Folklore
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“Sephardic Folklore: Exile and Homecoming” is an ambitious double issue which commemorates the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal. The collection of 22 articles is an important contribution to the field of Sephardic studies. As well, it is also a valuable source for those more generally interested in symbol and ritual.

The articles are very roughly arranged into four content areas. These are (1) song, dance and folktale, (2) custom and ritual, (3) history, and (4) crypto Jews. The first three areas of study draw upon materials from the old world (East Europe, Asia and Africa), and the last area focuses upon new-world materials. This organization could have been improved by formal delineations of the subsections and by brief introductions.

The articles are, by and large, well constructed, well researched, up-to-date, and informative, often containing extensive bibliographies. And although the studies appear diverse, by being framed within the Sephardic experience they share the common bond of being investigations of the concept of “home,” especially the special nature of the concept to an exiled community. “Home” is, of course, a construct central to a community’s identity, integrity and security. The articles show how this central area of functioning is maintained by the symbols of “home” presented in folklore, song, and ritual.

The best example of this may be found in two articles about saint veneration in North Africa (pp. 78-88). For generations, the tombs of great rabbis were visited by pilgrims to obtain good luck. When these Jewish families were forced to leave their homes and were no longer able to have access to the tombs of their ancestors, symbolic objects were constructed in new homes (Paris, for example, or Israel) to resurrect the original site of the pilgrimages. And the original ceremonial was also resurrected through symbolic gestures and songs with accompanying manipulations of symbolic objects. A synagogue would often represent the original site. Within the synagogue, a written memorial to the saint-rabbi and a photograph often represented the tomb. Ritual movements of people singing songs, ritually narrating memories, and making gestures would recreate the original trek to the site. And the prayers and offerings that were originally made at the site to obtain the rabbi’s blessings and good luck were duplicated by chants and feasting.

This is a concrete illustration of a magical process that is probably universal. Ethnographers can often refer to ceremonial they have seen in which the participants move ritually from one station to another, performing esoteric

rites at each station. And, in many of these cases, the ethnographer can report that the movements are symbolic representations of past migrations or of the mythic travels of a great benefactor. The role of paintings, carvings, songs, narratives, dance, and gesture in spiritually recreating such events and in maintaining their benefits is well attested by ethnologists (Eliade 1963:18-19, for example).

This special issue of *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* demonstrates that Sephardic culture is not a museum piece. Rather, it is vibrant and alive. Its rituals, songs, dance and folklore are growing with the times and continuing to provide the strength that a sound culture always receives from such sources. We learn from this volume that folkways should not be treated as static phenomena—that, indeed, they cannot function properly as static phenomena. The invention and reinvention of custom is a continuing and necessary process. It is what keeps a culture alive. Once “heritage” is viewed as an untouchable, unchangeable museum piece, it dies and can no longer be a reliable source of identity and meaning.

Bibliography

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Archie GREEN (ed.), *Songs about Work: Essays in Occupational Culture for Richard A. Reuss*, (Bloomington, Folklore Institute, Indiana University, Special Publications No. 3, 1993, pp. vi + 360, ISBN 1-879407-05-1)

This volume offers fourteen case studies of (mostly) songs that embrace the experience of work, whether in the most unmediated sense (that is, “work songs” such as sea shanties in which rhythm and tempo are as critical to the song’s point as topic), or in the somewhat mediated sense (“occupational songs” about work sung—and often made—by workers themselves, as in cowboys’ songs of cattle drives, lumbermen’s of river drives), or in the highly mediated sense (“labour songs” that more often than not dwell on the relations of production, especially agonistic employer/employee ones, but that are seldom either made or sung widely by labouring people). Of these three categories, the first, work songs,