"The Virtual Genizah": Emerging North African Jewish and Muslim Identities Online

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After the establishment of the State of Israel, the Zionist narrative dominated the histories and historiographies of Middle Eastern and North African Jewries. Accordingly, Jews and Arabs were largely kept as distinct binaries divided by the intellectual walls that separated Middle East studies and Jewish studies programs. Local North African and Middle Eastern scholars also silenced or overlooked the Jewish dimension of Middle Eastern societies in the same manner that Israeli scholars ignored the historical connections between Arabs and Jews that existed both before and after 1948. The exclusive, sacred yet ebbing, nationalist paradigm has been plagued with historiographical fissures in recent decades, allowing a new wave of intellectual engagement by a young generation of Jewish and Muslim scholars who began to put the Jew and the Arab back into local and global histories formed through complex social, cultural, economic, and political networks.

The rewriting of North African Jewish-Muslim encounters, coexistence, and differences has been conducted by a new movement of historians, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists, among others, who have been able to cross the borderlines of their disciplines, challenge intellectual taboos, and interact with other schools of thought.[1] This trend in the discipline has enriched the field of Jewish–Muslim relations, and promises to broaden our knowledge and assessment of the complex historical colonial and postcolonial encounters between Jews and Muslims. In recent years, groups of ordinary Muslims and Jews have begun to highlight the historical links once suppressed by nationalist narratives through online communities that have facilitated communications between Jews and Muslims. This has helped create a Jewish–Muslim online global library of oral narratives, personal memories, and archival histories.

Until the early 1960s, North Africa housed one of the largest and most vibrant Jewish communities of the Arab world. Despite shared histories and cultures, the Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria had different experiences depending on the region and context. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the migrations of North African Jewries have led to the break-up of many communities as they resettled in separate countries and continents. With the emergence of social media as means of communication, North African Jews and Muslims began to remember their histories, neighborhoods, families, friends, and cemeteries through websites. On a daily basis, they post historical artifacts such as postcards, pictures, memorabilia, historical documents, and newspapers, creating what one of my informants called a "virtual Genizah" of significant value to historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists. These virtual Genizah shed light on the lives of poor and rich North African Jews. In a historical and anthropological study I have been conducting since 2004 on North African Jewish communities online, I see the nostalgia of Moroccan or Tunisian Jewish identity in relation to new identities that Jews and Muslims are living, creating, and adopting today.

In this short reflection, I underline the importance of an online history and historiography of North African Jewries in rethinking our understanding of Jewish–Muslim identities in an increasingly transnational world where these communities have almost disappeared from their native countries. I contend that these websites are forcing Jewish and Muslim participants to rethink their identities based on what is posted in virtual mediascapes.

In North African countries, a few thousands Jews live today in major urban centers in separate neighborhoods and with limited social contact with their Muslim neighbors. However, throughout the world, North African Jewish communities continue to maintain their historical relationships with their native villages and cities, mostly in Morocco and Tunisia. While some visit the sites of local shrines and attend religious festivals in these countries every year, others explore internet sites[2] that allow them to perform what they call "virtual pilgrimages" and daily "online trips" to places where Jewish communities once lived and to cemeteries where their family members are buried.

A historian doing research online faces challenges in confirming the reliability of these historical documents.[3] Nevertheless, as space is becoming increasingly mediated, historical scholarship on North African Jewries could benefit from new approaches to collecting oral histories through online methodologies. There are many mediated and interconnected online spaces that now house millions of documents and narratives related to Jewish-Muslim relations. Since North African Jews and Muslims online often do not share a personal history, they have to negotiate and perform new identities to access the space of others. Once relations begin, they are sustained and expanded to include other mediated spaces and communities. YouTube and Facebook have facilitated this online rewiring of Jewish and Muslim voices, as many groups have launched closed and open forums on these sites to share news, histories, and memories.

These emerging online communities are becoming the subject of ethnographic studies.[4] Since 2006, I have carried out an online ethnography that engages in participant (web)observation[5] of daily interactions between Moroccan Jews and Muslims. Because of my identity as a Moroccan Muslim anthropologist who studies Jewish communities of North Africa, and given the growing culture of North African hacking of Israeli websites, it took many months to establish a rapport of trust with my online informants. Despite these frustrating challenges, I was able to gain access into these web communities. I made sure to publicize from the beginning my online personae as a Muslim anthropologist.[6] In the end, I was able to learn the identities of many virtual participants in my online ethnography. Using the concept of circulation, I contend that North African Jewish communities worldwide maintain a "virtual community of memory" and that cyberspace is creating a new space for Jews of Morocco and Tunisia to revive and foreground their common Arab and Berber cultural identities.

This virtual circulation of individual Jewish memories has allowed the North African Jewish diaspora to emphasize a new identity outside the boundaries of Israeli, American, Canadian, and European nationalisms. As virtual locations of belonging and territories of living, many online spaces have provided Jews and Muslims new possibilities for interaction. The consumption of old photographs of schoolmates, postcard of houses, and pictures of rabbis is not only about building new connections with home but also about sharing old memories and histories of Morocco and North Africa.

One of the first and leading websites that has succeeded in reconnecting Tunisian Jewries worldwide is harissa.com.[7] Established by a Tunisian Jew who resides in Los Angeles with his Moroccan Jewish wife, harissa.com became a model for other online Jewish communities of Morocco (dafina.net) and Algeria (zlabia.com). These sites are spaces for Moroccan Jewish communities throughout the world to communicate. They have also helped rewire and reconnect Jews and Muslims after the virtual expansion of North African online Jewish territories. Several websites representing rural and urban Jews were launched after 2005.[8]

In the case of Morocco, Georges Sebat, a Moroccan-Canadian Jew, is one of the most active agents of these emerging mediated and interconnected Jewish–Muslim virtual spaces. Born in Agadir, Sebat spent his childhood in Morocco before leaving for Montreal to continue his studies. In 1993, he relocated to Casablanca, where he has been working in the real estate sector. Known by his virtual name GEOSEB, Sebat has developed numerous websites[9] about the Jewish communities of Moroccan cities such Agadir, Casablanca, Ouarzazate, Taroundant, Safi, Tangier, and Marrakesh. He has also focused on establishing online Jewish cemeteries by taking pictures of tombs throughout Morocco and posting them online so that family members can access them virtually.[10]

My first virtual communication and ethnographic study with Sebat took place after I saw the appearance of his name on different websites related to Moroccan Jewish histories. Before he launched the first historical website on the Jews of Agadir, Sebat created his family website famillesebat.com, where he provided a genealogy of his family with pictures and narratives. In 2007, he established communautejuiveagadir.com, which he contends is a new meeting place for people from Agadir and an emotional reminder of a Jewish–Muslim past. The website includes pictures, memorabilia, and histories of Agadir. He called on visitors to share historical pictures, testimonies, and videos as evidence of the Jewish life in Agadir. Equally important, Sebat called on Muslims from Agadir and around the globe to join the online Jewish community of Agadir and to circulate their personal photos and testimonies, in order to live and maintain the historical Jewish-Muslim entente.

These online communities established new home(s), "darna/diarna," where Jews and Muslims break psychological walls and state borders and "travel across the region as if on eagles' wings, unaffected by political and inter-religious strife below."[11] These Jewish-Muslim connections are also facilitated by satellite imagery and geographic information systems allowing panoramic tours of Jewish sites, linked to a YouTube channel.

While some online communities, such as Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, have focused on the Arab–Israeli conflict and the "expulsion of Jews of Arab lands," most websites stress the relatively positive relations between Jews and Muslims as well as their cultural, historical, and social connections to their places of origin. Occasionally the developers of these websites hire Muslim graduate students and youth to collect data on Jewish sites and interview Muslim individuals who hold memories of Jewish experiences in North Africa. For instance, Diarna (Our Homes), which works in collaboration with Muslim youth in Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, and other parts of North Africa, is at the forefront of digital mapping technologies, exploring the Jewish history of the Middle East and North Africa through the digitization of sites such

as synagogues, schools, neighborhoods, cemeteries, and shrines. However, despite the fact that these communities try to silence the Palestinian conflict, there are moments of conflict in which participants are blocked and websites hacked.

In addition to daily conversation and the sharing of personal pictures and stories, members of Jewish communities of North Africa, especially Morocco, have engaged in the foundation of virtual historical museums, where manuscripts, photographs, postcards, and other historical resources are exhibited and made available to researchers. These historical archives depict families, schools, and social lives and shed light on the urban and cultural changes of Jewish and Muslim communities. These sources are fundamental to social histories of North African Jewish communities. By building an interconnected world of memories, North African Jews are engaging in a collective process of remembering their North African pasts. Founded by Paul Dahan, a Moroccan Jew from Fès, the Centre de La Culture Judéo-Marocaine in Brussels is an important online archival historical museum and exhibition of North African Judaism.[12] Recently King Mohammed VI, as part of the Moroccan state's official celebration of Judaism, sponsored an online project by the Jewish community of Morocco to document Jewish cemeteries nationwide and establish an online database with genealogical accounts.

Online communities provide new opportunities to anthropologists and historians of the region. In the field of North African Jewish–Muslim relations, scholars have at their disposal troves of historical documents posted daily on websites they can instantly visit for historical vignettes and data. At the same time, these websites provide a space for a new generation of scholars to conceptualize a new borderless historiographical paradigm that escapes the shackles of nationalist histories and puts North African Jewish-Muslim relations back into world history. These virtual histories could play a significant and complementary role to our understanding of North African Jewish and Muslim memories and relations in real spaces.

NOTES

[1]Emily Gottreich and Daniel Schroeter, *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011).

[2]These sites include dafina.net, darnna.com, mimouna.net, marocorama.com, communautejuivea gadir.com, cimitierejuifcasablanca.com, and melca.info.

[3]Aron Rodrigue is one of the few historians who capitalizes on internet sources, using online accounts and newsletters to track narratives of the Jews of Rhodes and to analyze how their memory lives in translational diasporic spaces. See his keynote lecture "Sephardim, Memory, and the Holocaust," Symposium on Sephardic Jewry and the Holocaust, University of Washington, Seattle, 2013.

[4]Anne Beaulieu, "Mediating Ethnography: Objectivity and the Making of Ethnographies of the Internet," *Social Epistemology* 18 (2004): 139–163; S. M. Wilson and L.C. Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 449–67.

[5]Daniel Varisco, "September 11: Participant Webservation of the War on Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2008): 934–38.

[6]Elizabeth Buchanan, "Ethics, Qualitative Research, and Ethnography in Virtual Space," *Journal of Information Ethics* 2 (2000): 82–87.

[7]Abdelhamid Larguèche, "La culture juive de Tunisie entre histoire et mémoire: l'exemple du web des juifs tunisiens," Conference on Rethinking Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa, Tangier, Morocco, 2004.

[8]See mygenealogy.ch; rabbidavidoumoshe.com; rabbinessimbnessim.com; zehoutavot.com; rabbi davidbenbarroukh.com; melca.info; moroccan-judaism.org; juifdumaroc.over-blog.com; darnna.com; mi mouna.net; marocorama.com; and diarna.org.

[9]See juifdumaroc.over-blog.com.

[10]Representative sites include beit-hahayim-tanger.com, cimetierejuifmarrakech.com, communautejuiveagadir.com, and cimetierejuifcasablanca.com.

[11]See http://www.diarna.org/wordpress/Diarnawp/wordpress/about/.

[12]See http://www.judaisme-marocain.org.