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Ha-Shirah ha-'Aravit-Yehudit she-bi-khtav be-Ṣafon Afriqah [The Written Judeo-Arabic Poetry in North Africa: Poetic, Linguistic and Cultural Studies], JOSEPH CHETRIT

In this book, the author has collected his research into the five centuries of Judeo-Arabic poetry that has been written in North Africa since the 16th century. The material is dispersed in the sense that there are no complete diwans. The study is the product of a long period of inquiry into and of collecting Judeo-Arabic poetry used and written in North Africa (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco). The author has made use of printed books as well as hundreds of manuscripts found in public and private
libraries throughout the world; he also carried out fieldwork among Moroccan Jews in Israel, where he recorded the Arabic poetry that has remained in the memory of men and women (passed down from mother to daughter for many generations).

This book aims to present a panorama of the written Judeo-Arabic poetic tradition of North Africa. The poetic texts are introduced and described in it, and the original Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic texts are given along with their Hebrew translations.

In his historical overview, the author gives an idea of the older period (before the 16th century, where we sometimes find dates in the manuscript such as one thousand and x hundred years after the destruction of the second temple) when the Judeo-Arabic of the poems can sometimes be archaic (e.g. the occurrence of the ‘an’ particle in the neighbourhood of numbers and time indications, the preservation of diphthongization, etc.). The author illustrates this with some poetry examples taken from Vatican manuscript 411, including a debate poem between wine and water (see p. 40).

Almost all the material is connected with the religious or communal life of the Jews in North Africa—although the poetry is in a way timeless—and is often connected with Jewish ceremonies. Many pieces are anonymous, while elsewhere names of poets are known or mentioned in acrostics. Chapter 2 presents more than 100 poems of prayer (p. 57) and of praise (p. 62), poems on exile and redemption (p. 136), and liturgical and para-liturgical poems (p. 160).

The author deals amply with Judeo-Arabic religious poetry in North Africa during the last 500 years. All these poems have a religious focus and represent the traditional Jewish existence in the Diaspora. It was possible to introduce some Arabic para-liturgical poems into the religious ceremonies. In essence, all the poems deal mainly with two religious subjects. The first is praise of the Almighty as a source of benevolence for bringing the atrocities that had befallen the communities in the Diaspora to an end. Praise of God’s Unity occurs too, e.g. poem no. 5; p. 68 (all transcriptions and translations are tentative):

1. Tawhid rabb al-‘alim; hu sultan/qabl la yukhlaq/La malik walla sitan, fa-di smmitu /
fsada-hu, la ilaha illa-l-Lah, hu ilahu la ilaha illa-hu.//
2. Ma illa mti la sibha/khalaq ad-dunya wa-rda bi-ha/ Yitkhallaq man ‘asa-hul la ilaha illa huwa/‘
3. Man ‘asa-hu wa-tab ilu/yadici-lu qandihi/zi-yifarraz ‘alayhi ilahull

1. The Unity of the Omniscient Lord; He was the Ruler before/Angel and Satan were created; I mentioned his name because He is beyond perception; there is no god but God/
2. He has no like nor equal/he created the world and was satisfied with it//. He separates himself from those who rebel against him/there is no god but Him/
3. Who rebels against him and shows repentance/his God will light his candle and set him free/.

The second subject is the Jewish religious year, whose global theme is redemption, with Pesach as the feast celebrating freedom and the exodus of the Israelites from the land of Egypt and the Havdalah ceremony after Shabbath exalting the prophet Elihu, the Announcer of Redemption. The poems may be the link between the glorious past and the future redemption which is dreamt of. Many poems were written in the 16th century honouring David ha-Re’uveni (ca. 1483–1538) and Shabbetay Zvi (1626–76)
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in the 17th century. To give an example of this last category, the following is the opening sentence of a small fragment from a manuscript from western Algeria (p. 155):

‘Ilahu Isra‘el farraj ‘alayna/Shabbetay ha-Sevi marsul ja-na/
The God of Israel sent us relief/because Shabbetay Zvi came to us as a messenger/

Chetrit asks himself why poets felt it necessary to write their religious poems in Judeo-Arabic too, rather than limiting themselves to Hebrew poetry in a time that many—and perhaps all—of them were bilingual. The answer seems to lie in poetic consciousness as well as practical didactic reasons. The linguistic variety offered by the Arabic higher standards and the Judeo-Arabic daily language of the sharih (or explanation of the Hebrew Bible in Arabic vernacular) made it possible for them to vary linguistic levels and enrich their poems in accordance with the tradition of the community and the informal interaction that prevailed in their time between it and the neighbouring Muslim educational substructure. In this manner every poet could express his individual style in his creation and individualize it in relation to the creations of other poets, even at a time when the main religious themes were not individual but universal. The tradition of the Arabic language that was used in poetry was totally and clearly intertextual and shared by all composers, who all shared basically the same training in learning and reading scripture and the preceding liturgical poetry.

As for the practical dimension of Judeo-Arabic, as opposed to Hebrew poetry, probably only 5–10% of the members of the congregations in North Africa could understand the Hebrew poems in the right way or participate in a poet’s process of creation, let alone appreciate the melodies of the poems. On the other hand, the number of mixed Hebrew–Arabic passages in the poetic text was very large, and they were encountered among men and women; even when the Jewish poet sometimes used higher levels of language than the daily vernacular, the cultural heritage and linguistic tradition was shared by broad layers of society.

Both the Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic religious poems are at the basis of the bilingual poetry of the marruz (embroidery) genre, a strophic genre which sometimes resembles the ancient Andalusian muwashshahät, because of rhyme schemes such as aaaa, bbzz, etc. as well the fact that the strophes were clearly meant to be accompanied by melodies. This genre combining Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic in various structures in the same text and often in the same strophe or even in the same verse is dealt with in Chapter 3. The author speaks at length of the marruz poetry of the North African Jews, explains the marruz genre (p. 195), deals with external and confronting marruz (p. 207), duplicating marruz (p. 230), internal marruz (p. 262) and the development of the Maturuz genre in the 20th century (p. 299).

The combinations of the Hebrew and Arabic are sometimes simply the Hebrew text plus its translation, but at other times because the strophes were sung, they combined Hebrew and Arabic texts that have nothing to do with each other apart from the melody. To today’s unaffected and innocent reader, this sometimes leads to amusing results. At least that is what the reviewer thinks of bilingual poems whose strophes go as follows (from Chapter 3: Shirat ha-Marruz; paragraph 2.2.1, Poem 98; p. 208):

1. Godel Ram Qadosh, Eli/Goal/Sur Ḥelvi/
2. U-sheva‘ jaw mi yehgor? Ki lo tehillah dumiyah/
3. Ub-benat Fas iz-zedid we-Fas le-bal‘a-ma-li/
4. In-nsa kharzu yiinazzahu/buruz ya‘zaba-k l-gdra
J. Sam 'abim rekhubo kanfe niahlRab koahll
2. 'Ale-hem yanua}^IHoit.<eh way-Yihych lue-Hayah/
3. Nazlu ma yitkul we-qalu: hayyi-lila-ma-lil/
4. S Rae at-say was-sugqarwe-tarhu hda-hum is-sufrall
1. Exalted Holy Majesty, my God, my Redeemer, Rock of my Strength.
2. Who can search His Praise? Glory awaits Him (Ps 65:2)
3. And the girls of the old and the new Fez -o me!
4. The women went out for a promenade; they make a great impression on you,
they amuse themselves on the towers.
1. He makes the clouds His chariot [and walks] upon the wings of the wind (Ps
104:3), Lord of Power.
2. Above them He takes rest: Present, Future and Past.
3. They went out to eat and said: here we go; -o me!
4. They bought tea and sugar/and made up the table for themselves.

And 2.2.2, Poem 99, p. 209:
1. Shor Yisra'elj yo'es^ el gibbor, lamniah?
2. 'ad mah middah be-yad 'am had-domeh le-hamor/yonah honah shekhulah/golah
we-suara/
3. Loni sfar wa-raza mitil le-kabur/mama ummi dado/
4. Wa-le-manam haras-mi, wa-le-manam haras-ni/za-mawali tabat sahira/
1. Me-'are Gozen la-Hlah Havor/ii-rtddde nedudali/
2. Tiqbos lashub kc-qedcm, lishmor/piqqudc-kha be-gilah/dibre hal-Torah/
3. Biina nigdint uic-le-kisan tadur/lala ummi dadaJ
4. Uv-sma ' fi-l-hasakah yewalwi/ya'mi ilara/
1. Bull of Israel, Adviser of the powerful Lord, why?
2. Until when will the seclusion last of a people which resembles an ass/a dove
which has encamped bereaved from its young/in exile and seclusion/
3. My colour is pale and becomes like jaundice/oh beloved mamma, my mother/
4. Sleep oppressed me/sleep oppressed me/but my friends remained awake.
1. From the towns of Gozen until Halah and Habor, whenever she is banished/
2. She gathers in order to return as of old, she keeps your precepts with joy/, the
words of the Law/
3. We spent the night amusing ourselves, when the cups went around, oh my lady,
my mother/
4. And the candles lurked in the candlestick turning in circles.

The fourth and last chapter is devoted to a historical elegy on the epidemic which
befell the community of Tafilalat (Afilal) in southeastern Morocco in 1679, a great and
very rich community of thousands of Jews which was almost entirely annihilated by the
plague. The long poem was probably written by a teacher, who proposed the destroyed
community as an example for future generations. There is almost no other historical
evidence for this kind of occurrence of disease. In 143 lines, the long elegiac poem
called Story of Tafilalat (Qissat Tafilalat) tells how the pestilence killed so many people
that the community was virtually wiped out within three months. To give an example
of a strophe of this long elegy (p. 356):
21. Weep about the community of wise men, writers, to whom happened the same as what happened to the unbelievers.
22. To whom directed themselves people from all countries.
23. But now happened to them the same as what happened to the enemy; they died without even leaving children behind them.
24. Woe is us, to whom happened this event!
25. In which flood perished all what we toiled for and brought up.

The author deals with the language of the poem and its structures (p. 322), and then gives the original text and the translation (p. 354). However, in my transcription of the fragments above I had to reconstruct the vowels, since in Hebrew (as in Arabic) writing they are not recorded. The last poem seems closer to the standard or classical Arabic language, whereas the genres in the other chapters are sometimes more in line with the vernacular found in the shuriih literature (i.e. translations of the Hebrew Bible into Moroccan vernacular Arabic). Reading the other poems one is impressed by the inconsistencies and unusual renderings of the Arabic: non-emphatic consonants have become emphatic, emphatic consonants are rendered non-emphatic, and qaf and kaf are sometimes rendered with gimel (whereas, incidentally, kāf is represented by qāf; e.g. shazvq instead of shazvk ‘thorn’ on p. 361). This is what happens when Arabic is written phonetically and the suprasegmental nature of emphasis and non-emphasis in Arabic becomes visible. Double consonants are sometimes written (instead of shaddah), vowel signs are written as alif, waaw, ya‘, etc. whereas, except for some examples in the above-mentioned Vatican manuscript, the alif-lam as sign of the definite noun is not written. Sibilants are sometimes rendered alternatively: j is sometimes rendered z, and shin is sometimes rendered sin, phenomena which go back to features of Judeo-Arabic dialects.

I hope that the author will in the future give some transliterations of songs with vowels as recorded from Jewish informants who were and still are part of the living Jewish tradition of Morocco, in order to give more insight into how the written poems were traditionally pronounced. Now the Hebrew writing, with its mainly consonantal rendering, makes it impossible to obtain an exact idea about the vowels.

In any case, we are grateful that the author has confronted us with this remarkable kind of strophic literature, which until now most Arabists did not even know existed. The author has to be congratulated on his book, which is a most helpful contribution to the study of Judeo-Arabic literature in vernacular and at the same time that of the history of many aspects of Jewish communal life in Morocco. For the average Arabist, the interest of the material lies probably in the varieties of Judeo-Arabic strophic poetry presented in this study—poetry which was meant to be sung—and also in its often bilingual nature and its possible links with Muslim popular literature of Morocco.

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