

Prayers of Portuguese Anusim in Contemporary Brazil
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Anywhere Spanish or Portuguese is spoken, there remain descendents of Jews forced to convert to Catholicism during the Iberian persecutions of the 14th and 15th centuries, who have maintained their Jewish heritage or some form of Jewish identity. Such anusim can be found today on the Iberian Peninsula and throughout the former Spanish and Portuguese dependencies -- from Brazil to Manila.

I would like to take this opportunity to present some of my findings on the traditions preserved by these families. Such studies are time-critical, as our aging informants continue to disappear with every passing year. I hope to convince you -- by means of one example -- of the importance and wealth of information still awaiting discovery and documentation. I'll conclude by discussing some of the problematic aspects that require special attention.

After a lecture I gave in Chicago on anusim some two years ago, I was approached by many local Latinos. Among them was Iunis, a Brazilian man who sought confirmation for his feeling that his family is descended of Jews. According to a family tradition, their ancestor arrived in the region as a stowaway because of trouble with the king or the nobility. He said that three to five families married among themselves. Family proverbs included: "N~o te cases fora da fortuna" ("Don't marry out the fortune") and "N~o casar fora da familia". When Iunis got on the school bus in his native Southern Brazil, most of the kids were cousins. Iunis estimates his "clan" to number between 30-40,000 people. But from what he related to me, I was unable to offer any confirmation of Jewish heritage. Not deterred, Iunis returned with his mother, Dorvina, and aunt, Jussara. He had already said that the women in his family are the better educated, the smarter and the more knowledgeable.

Dorvina, herself, gave no credence to her son's suspicion. A teacher by profession, she grew up in Bom Jesus, a small town in the state of Santa Catarina, in Brazil. Dorvina's family, which originated in northern Portugal, had been in Santa Catarina for some three centuries, from before the founding of Porto Alegre -- the major regional city and capital of the neighboring state of Rio Grande do Sul.

There was no priest living in Bom Jesus; an itinerant priest arrived only a few times each year. Dorvina explained that the families Velho and Vieira married only among themselves and that the priest, who did not approve of their endogamy, occasionally forced marriages with other families. Dorvina had been educated in a convent, but after intense courting, she married her late husband, a Palestinian-Moslem Arab.

At first, our conversation revealed relatively little by way of crypto-Jewish practices; just a few tradition having to do with death, burial and mourning which echoed possible Jewish customs. As we were

discussing prayers related to death and mourning, I showed her a copy of prayers recorded from anusim in Belmonte, Portugal (from Maria Antonieta Garcia's book). Dorvina looked astonished and said these prayers were oral, and are not supposed to be published. In a moment, she was marking which of the prayers were familiar and which were not. She explained that the prayers were kept hidden from the priest and that she never heard nor saw any prayers of this nature in the convent. Dorvina further indicated that there was a special way to say these prayers, and chanted some into my tape-recorder, with her eyes closed, making the same gestures and intonation as do Ana Rodrigo from Belmonte, Portugal, and her older sister Conceic,~o.

Even when seeing the prayers in print, Dorvina did not immediately understand that these were recorded as specifically Jewish prayers. She was never told that she was of Jewish extraction, and the "quaint" customs she remembers from her childhood did not come with any religious explanation.

I wish to re-emphasize that Dorvina came to me to accommodate her son, and did not at all think that there was a Jewish background in her family. Both she and her sister recalled an incident at the home of Ivonne, the mystic in the family in which a spirit visited. The spirit, named Justina, told Dorvina and Jussara that there were secrets in the family which they don't know, and then laughed. Ivonne, by her relatives' accounts, is a powerful mystic who performed astral surgery among other feats. But until their visit at my office, it never dawned upon the sisters that the secret might have to do with a Jewish past.

When I asked Dorvina why the priest was not allowed to know about these oral prayers she reminded me that there was an Inquisition in Brazil. This seemingly anachronistic anxiety is very common among anusim, but in our case Dorvina, who was not aware of a Jewish background in her family, was unable to give any reason for the fear and secrecy. It may be that the answer lies with a partial, subliminal knowledge. Iunis, Dorvina's son, learned from an uncle that the family elders did say that they were Jewish. Other relatives also knew something about a connection to Judaism, but did not talk about it much, and their source was not always divulged. For example, on a trip I made with Iunis to his family in Brazil, one relative told me that in the bars friends would tell him he was Jewish since his name -- di Oliveira -- was considered a New Christian name, but it was evident that he was withholding more conclusive testimony to the fact.

The following picture of family life back in Brazil emerged from long conversations, with Iunis, Dorvina and their relatives from Southern Brazil. (In the limited time we have here, I will not demonstrate the "Jewish connections".)

As Dorvina remembers it from childhood, animals were slaughtered with a sharp knife kept especially for that purpose. The knife was checked for sharpness on the skin of the palm of the hand or on a finger in advance of each use. Cows were killed lying on the ground, sheep were hung from their hind legs, and chicken had their head twisted off and then were hung to drain the blood. Dorvina has no recollection of anything being said in advance of the killing.

Salting the meat with coarse salt is still very widespread in the area today. The meat barbecued in the traditional churrasco is first salted with coarse salt. Some continue to baste the meat with salt

water during the roasting. If the meat is to be cooked on the stove, it is first soaked in saltwater made with coarse salt. Soaking meat in salt water is common among descendants of anusim throughout Latin America and is mentioned in Inquisition records. Despite the salting, which is a rabbinic method to remove blood, Dorvina did not know of a proscription against eating blood. Although she did learn that eggs with blood spots in them were not to be eaten, morcilha or morcela -- a blood sausage -- and blood sauce were eaten regularly. The fat was not eaten and was used only to produce soap and candles. When I asked if any parts of the meat were avoided, Dorvina's response was negative and the fat issue came up by accident. On the other hand, other relatives from Southern Brazil, whose churrasco I ate at.

During the visit I made with Dorvina's family in Brazil, I found that in her age-group (of 50-60) virtually no one adheres to the separation of meat and milk any longer, but that they were all raised on this rule. This also included separation of fish and milk which is referred to in Sefardic Jewish sources. Dorvina has relatives in Palmares do Sul who still consider blood to be unclean. This wealthy family carefully observed many customs of anusim. In the home of these people, as in Dorvina's home, the custom was to wait a meal's distance between meat and milk. As Dorvina put it to me, "If you ate meat at noon, you waited till dinner time to have milk, so it does not mix in your stomach".

The belief that if you point at stars you will have worts grow on your fingers began with the Inquisition looking for Jews marking the end of the Sabbath or fast-days. This has become an extremely widespread superstition among all Brazilians and was also known to Dorvina. Sabbath candles were unknown.

Sweeping the house inward to the middle of the floor is a sefardi Jewish custom mentioned once in the rabbinic literature as well as in Inquisition dossiers and in Portugal's literature. This custom has become an extremely widespread superstition in Brazil, where people say that if you sweep the dirt out of your house you are throwing out your fortunes. In Dorvina's house this too was kept, and they were especially careful to sweep inwards and gather the dirt in a bag in advance of anyone taking a trip.

When a family member passed away the body was washed and dressed in new garments called mortalha -- the name for burial shrouds. Dorvina was unable to recall what these shrouds looked like, if they had a particular color or shape or were made of a specific fabric, but said her grandmother prepared them for herself in advance of her death, and that it was a long dress. All she knew in addition is that the mortalha had to be a natural fabric and new. Burial took place within 24 hours. Prayers from the Oral Tradition were recited, as well as Psalms, but the Padre Nosso was omitted. Water which was in the house of the deceased was spilled out; windows were shut, mirrors were covered with cloth. For seven days the family sat at home on low stools and people came to visit. The first thirty days following the death included intense mourning and praying. Special prayer meetings were also held during several intervals and at the end of the year of mourning. Stones were placed on graves by visitors.

Dorvina, and the other women I interviewed, knew shorter versions of the prayers than those in the published collections from contemporary Portugal, but the most significant difference was the time and circumstances in which these prayers were said. Dorvina knew more

prayers than her relatives, and the latter consistently indicated prayers that Dorvina did recognize, without knowing which prayers she knew. Ivonne's daughter identified fewer prayers than Ivonne did, but pointed only to ones her mother recognized (with one possible exception).

Although the prayers for rising and washing, for safe travel and for nightmares were typically recited at the appropriate time, prayers for holy days and the Sabbath were said almost exclusively in connection to death and burial. These prayers typically lost the terminology specific to the original event as well. The second and third passages, "O Senhor me aben
que" and "Senhor Deus Omnipotente", from Belmonte's Yom Kippur cycle were said after dinner and in death or difficult times, respectively. The first passage which mentions Yom Kippur, specifically, is not known to my informants.

Moreover, the name Adonai is not familiar with the anusim from Brazil who recognized the prayers. This name is replaced with Deus or Senhor despite the fact that the name Adonai can be found in Brazil on anything from barber-shop signs to Masonic lodges. In another conversation, I repeated to Dorvina my question as to this name, with the text from Portugal in front of her. She again said that she did not recognize it, but suggested that, not having seen the prayers written down, she might have mixed up the word the way children might (indivisible = in the window sill, etc.). As it is, many corruptions have fallen into these texts over the centuries, and they seem to be accepted naturally by the people who recite them.

Jesus' name is also absent from the prayers, although I did meet one woman who seemed to have every mixture imaginable in her arsenal of prayers. Dorvina explained that they -- the Catholics -- do not tend to mention Jesus' name unnecessarily, and prefer to say Deus or Senhor. It is the Protestants who mention Jesus' name indiscriminately, she said.

The fact that the prayers were not identified as Jewish and were preserved and recited mainly in connection to death and in contracted form indicates that in all likelihood the prayers were not imported to Brazil in recent time but indeed were brought along with the anusim when they first arrived, and are diminishing and getting lost over time along with the other traditions. Hence the close ties with death, the rituals around which are the last to be abandoned in my experience.

Dorvina did her own research. She collected Portuguese and Spanish prayer books and searched them for prayers that resemble those that were said in the home, and for which she did not know of parallels among the formal prayers she knew. After thousands of pages, she came back saying she found none, but she is still looking. Manuel da Costa Fontes, who investigates Portuguese ballads and prayers, suspects that some of these prayers might turn out to have a pre-Christian origin. I do hope that with future discoveries and systematic evaluation we will, at the least, learn to distinguish between pre- and post-exilic prayers. I have little doubt that some of the prayers we are recording today were composed by women and said at home before the expulsion and forced conversions, akin to the tehines in Yiddish. Such distinctions will help shed light on subsequent influences on and by prayers of surrounding cultures.

How were these prayers recited in Brazil? Despite the still scant sources it already appears that there were several customs. In Dorvina's community there were "prayer experts" who knew how to chant them and led the rest of the community. Such a person was locally called benzedor, more commonly known as benzedeiro or benzedeira, the name for the person who chased away bad influences with incantations and other supernatural aids. One such benzedor was Dorvina's uncle, but she reports there were also African descendents of slaves who were trained to memorize and recite the prayers. Typically they possessed a good voice and charisma. When a person died, was ill or needed divine interference, the experts would be called upon and pray or lead prayers resembling the ones from Belmonte, depending on the circumstances.

The subject of slaves and their adaptation of Jewish practices deserves further attention. In Brazil many of the Jewish customs were preserved under a guise of superstitions and precautions related to health. So it is with the superstitions regarding pointing at stars or sweeping the floors; so it is with the belief that eating seafood without fins and scales, and mixing meat and milk are dangerous for one's health. Dressing a religious practice with such explanations, can help to protect the secrecy of those practicing it. At the same time it facilitates its dissemination outside the original group, and the preliminary evidence indicates that indeed this happened to various degrees with customs originally identified uniquely as Jewish. This process is fascinating in its own right, and not only from the perspective it gives in the studies of the anusim.

In Salvador, Bahia, I met a woman whose family is of Portuguese origin and has been in the Bahia for some three hundred years. At first she told me she could not recall where she recognized the Belmonte prayers from. Only after I indicated that I was aware she told a common friend that she was of Jewish extraction did she volunteer more information. She is married to a Spaniard who does not like Jews and is afraid to expose her identity, but she displayed excited curiosity toward the information I had and the prayers, several of which she remembered. She told me that as a child, on Sunday mornings before going to Church, she was obliged to sit and copy such prayers in a notebook and decorate the pages nicely. The notebook was then locked in a drawer and never shown to strangers. This woman spoke about family prayers, but nothing about anything in a more public forum; no benzedores.

Dorvina, who never thought it permissible to write such prayers learned of an aunt who did copy them and we hope to have the opportunity to study her prayers eventually. I have a copy of such a book for personal use from South Portugal. The language is poor, and many words are wrongly joined, but the contents are very moving.

Anita Novinsky, the pioneering scholar from Brazil, informs me that a student of hers is now recording oral histories from people who claim to be crypto-Jews. This marks a wonderful new development indeed, and I will discuss here some of the problems I came across in doing similar work elsewhere. First is the fact that those who claim to be Jewish and seek this kind of "hearing" are often people who wish to gain acceptance as Jews or have relatives who seek to do so. Such people may have read or heard about practices considered Jewish, and it is not impossible that they embellish their personal histories with some of this new information. This phenomenon is very common in regions where publicity invades and distorts, and the ties to Judaism

become something exotic or otherwise worthy of attention. New Mexico in the US is an example for this process. The process can develop almost unconsciously among those who must struggle for recognition.

There are great merits in recording traditions from elders who do not claim to have a Jewish heritage, and are not aware of any particular interest on the part of the people doing the documenting. There are elders who belong to communities that are likely of some Jewish background and have preserved some of the heritage. Although indeed the majority of the anusim in Brazil settled in the north, the little I saw bears witness to the fact that there is much to learn from and about anusim in the South as well. Therefore extra care must be taken in selecting control groups, and I remind you again of the degree of spread of some of the anusim's customs in Brazil and the channels for this process that still need further examination.

In conclusion, I am not telling anything new about the survival of descendents of anusim with Jewish heritage and identification with Judaism to varying degrees. This is plain to everyone seriously studying this field. What is new is the discovery that prayers were preserved and are still recited in various places, and the field of study is wide and filled with more information begging to be uncovered. Brazil, with its large and multi-cultured population is brimming with fascinating knowledge; not only from processos of the Inquisition and other documents, but from people living today. Like in the rest of the world, transmission of the old traditions is breaking down and the knowledge is fast disappearing. Dorvina and her family demonstrate this as well. Many are researching Belmonte, Portugal, where a community lives that has been under the microscope of scholars for nearly a century, and where interesting changes have recently taken place. Few, however, go far and work among people and communities.