

BETWEEN THE WAVES AND THE SEA STRAND: SACRED AND PROFANE THEMES IN A SEPHARDIC WEDDING SONG

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Introduction

It is the aim of the present contribution to provide an analysis of the text, context and symbolism of a concrete Sephardic wedding song. At the same time I will also elaborate on the original function of this song in the broader framework of the Sephardic community, as well as on its re-contextualisation within the so-called *world music* movement. I have selected as a case study the Sephardic wedding song *Ya salyó de la mar la galana* [The Beauty Emerged from the Sea], which, thanks to the poetic quality of its lyrics and the captivating beauty of its air, has become a favourite staple of the repertory of many interpreters specialised in Sephardic music performance, as well as in world music in a broader sense. The reader must be forewarned that I will be approaching the subject from my position as Hispanist and also a singer who interprets this song often to the acclaim of various audiences. My contribution is therefore conceived as a reflection on the significance of a concrete Sephardic wedding song, as well as on its anchoring in a wider Hispanic, and Mediterranean cultural context. From the point of view of interpretation, my interest is centered on the re-contextualisation of the song after it has been displaced from the narrowly-defined framework of the Sephardic communities of the Eastern Mediterranean, and begins to appear on world festival stages, through its interpretation by artists of both Sephardic and non-Sephardic origin. Given my academic and artistic interests, I have decided to address the concrete example of Sephardic wedding song; I believe, however, that similar reflections can be applied to traditional music in a broader international context.

Sephardic wedding song

Traditional Sephardic songs are an example of the singular cultural syncretism that characterises the Sephardic Diaspora from its historical beginnings in the year 1492. Sephardic Jews, who had inhabited the Iberian Peninsula since times immemorial,¹ brought with them into exile the Castilian language, alongside the other Iberian Romance vernaculars spoken at the time. From this mix of linguistic material emerged Judeo-Spanish, which not only became the chief medium of expression of Sephardic culture, but gave it a decidedly Hispanic cultural imprint, which further developed under the influence of the surrounding cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, without ever losing its fundamentally Jewish character. And it is precisely the Sephardic traditional song repertory where this mutual influence of Mediterranean cultures is best documented. Furthermore, in this context, wedding songs – thanks to their specific social function – represent a liminal, oneiric space, where on a symbolic level the sacred sphere meets the profane, and where the Jewish and Hispanic cultural heritage becomes interwoven with elements of surrounding cultures.

Traditional Sephardic songs had been for centuries performed principally within the secluded environment of North-African and Ottoman Jewish communities. The latter had, thanks to the unique administrative arrangement of the Ottoman *millet* (that is, a commonwealth of nations under Ottoman rule), maintained their cultural and linguistic singularity. When in the second half of the eighteenth century the Ottoman Empire underwent a series of modernizing reforms (known as *Tanzimât* or “reorganisation”) and European cultural influences began to reach the Eastern Mediterranean, the musical tradition of the Sephardic Jews captivated the interest and imagination of

1. According to archaeological evidence it is possible to trace Jewish presence on the Iberian Peninsula to the 1st century AD, however according to Sephardic tradition, Jewish communities existed here much earlier, already in times of King Solomon (Diaz-Mas 1992: 1).

European ethnographers, linguists and musicologists. The first pioneering studies and field research projects (see, for instance, Wagner 1930; Luria 1930; Crews 1935) served as a basis for more narrowly focused academic research from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Through the medium of the first phonograph recordings (Bernardete 1981: 3-13) and public performances traditional Sephardic song overcame the frame of an exclusively Sephardic context. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, they were increasingly recorded and performed on international stages.

It is noteworthy that with an increase in popularity of Sephardic song among non-Sephardic audiences (particularly from the 1960s on) a re-contextualisation takes place also on an ethnic level; ever more frequently we encounter interpretations of Sephardic music by non-Jewish musicians, leading to variety of results and situations, poignantly described by Ruth Ellen Gruber in her book *Virtually Jewish* (Gruber 2002: 225-234).

This process of de- and re-contextualisation concerns the Sephardic song repertory as a whole, but particularly those songs which have defined roles in the lives of the Sephardic community. Wedding songs can in this sense serve as an excellent case study, not only because they had a very definite function in bringing a spiritual dimension to life-cycle celebrations, but also because, due to their poetic texts and captivating airs they arguably became the most beloved of Sephardic songs, as illustrated by their lasting popularity among audiences and interpreters alike.

Wedding songs represent a specific thematic and functional repertory within the Sephardic song tradition, as they establish a “popular” framework of sorts to the wedding liturgy proper. Simultaneously, they create and define a sacred space wherein interpreters and audiences alike can become immersed, and thus actively participate in the wedding ritual.

It is vitally important to note that in Sephardic communities wedding songs were almost exclusively performed by the women who accompanied the bride during the preparation for her wedding ceremony, until the moment when she stood beside her

groom under the wedding canopy. After the wedding ceremony, they were sung as part of the general merriment and celebration. Thus women, who were excluded from the liturgical aspect of the celebration, were enabled to participate in the wedding ritual, albeit not in its core elements, but rather in its accompanying events.

***Ya salyó de la mar la galana* [The Beauty Emerged from the Sea]**

As noted above, the wedding song *Ya salyó de la mar la galana*, also known under the title *La galana i el mar* [The Beauty and the Sea], is today one of the most popular Sephardic songs. For the purposes of this contribution, I will refer to the Salonica variant of the text, which is included below alongside its English translation:

<i>Muchachika stá en el banyo vestida de kolorado</i>	<i>The maiden is in the bath, Dressed in bright red,</i>
<i>Échate a la mar i alkansa échate a la mar...</i>	<i>Chorus: Set sail and go to sea, Go to sea...</i>
<i>A la mar yo byen me echava, si la sfuegra lisensya me dava</i>	<i>I would gladly go to sea, If only my mother-in-law allowed it.</i>
<i>Entre la mar i el río mos krezyó un árvol de bembriyo.</i>	<i>Between the sea and the river bank There grew a quince tree.</i>
<i>Ya salyó de la mar la galana kon un vestido al y blanco, ya salyó de la mar.</i>	<i>The maiden emerged from the sea, Dressed in white and pink She emerged from the sea.</i>
<i>La novya ya salyó del banyo, el novyo la stá asperando, ya salyó de la mar.</i>	<i>The bride emerged from the sea And the groom is awaiting, She emerged from the sea.</i>
<i>Entre la mar i la arena mos krezyó un árvol de almendra ya salyó de la mar.</i>	<i>Between the waves and the sea-strand There grew an almond tree, She emerged from the sea.</i>

Formally the song belongs to the repertory of the so-called *Cancionero* (for a typology of Sephardic song see Weich Shanak, n.d.) and it is freely based on the structure of Spanish popular song: several stanzas with assonance rhyme, so characteristic of Castilian folk poetry, are completed with a recurrent refrain. Alternatively stanzas are composed of couplets, each line repeated twice.

The interpretation of songs from the *Cancionero* repertory, called *kantigas* in the Eastern Mediterranean and *kantes* in North Africa, was carried out in unison by a lead singer (the *tanyadera*) assisted by a chorus of accompanying voices in the refrains and repetitions. Instrumental accompaniment was minimal, usually restricted to percussion. This most often consisted of a simple rhythm played on a frame drum, or two metal spoons, alternatively by striking a metal spoon against a glass or other resonating object of household use (Cohen 2010). This original form of accompaniment is very distant from the complex arrangements of modern interpreters, however it is by no means less effective. The resulting impact of the song was magnified by its very context and significance: that is, the sacred, and at once profane dimension of the wedding celebration, which had traditionally been the goal which the life of the bride had gravitated towards.

Wedding songs are an intrinsic component of a ritual of paramount social, but above all religious significance, and thus in their lyrics we encounter religious symbols in close proximity of the profane. The song *Ya salyó de la mar la galana* leads both interpreters and audience throughout the bride's preparation for the wedding ceremony, and by means of highly suggestive metaphorical imagery creates a festive atmosphere full of tension and anticipation. It is the forepart of wedding liturgy and at the same time a celebration of the bride, in all her beauty and radiance.

The thematic core of the song is represented by recurring mentions of the sea (*ya salyó de la mar la galana*), or encouragement to set sail (*échate a la mar y alkansa*). The sea itself holds a series of important connotations in the Sephardic context. From a geographical perspective the Mediterranean represents

the fundamental space around which the Sephardic Diaspora is established (Bohlman 2008: 51). The first Jews who reached the shores of the Iberian Peninsula did so according to Sephardic tradition on board Phoenician and Greek merchant ships, around the sixth century BC. In 1492 and the years that followed, the majority of Sephardic Jews set sail from Spain's Mediterranean ports and travelled in the opposite direction, towards North Africa, the Italic Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. Here Sephardim established the centres of their second diaspora, which Max Weinreich refers to as *Sepharad 2* (Weinreich 1980: 126). The sea is thus the road towards exile, both in its initial phase following the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, as well as in 1492, and ensuing centuries. Ultimately, on an eschatological level, the Mediterranean represents the return of the Jewish people to their promised land, as its waves carry forth the ships of immigrants to the Holy Land. The sea is therefore both a defining space and simultaneously the way of exile and return.

Within the context of wedding symbolism, we understand the sea as an untamed, unpredictable force of nature, symbolic of erotic desire and its many uncertainties. The recurring refrain *échate a la mar* is, at the same time, a Sephardic proverb employed as an encouragement to risky, daring behaviour (Saporta y Beja 1978: 123). Here it represents the feelings of insecurity experienced by the bride before the wedding ceremony.

Several times in the text we encounter references to the ritual bath, or *mikveh*,² into which the bride must immerse prior to the wedding ceremony and from which she emerges dressed in red (*muchachika stá en el banyo vestida de kolorado*). The immersion in the ritual bath is a key element of the Sephardic wedding, followed by the *noche de novia*, a celebration in honor of the bride in exclusively female company, which provides an

2. See verses 1 (*Muchachika stá en el banyo*) and 5 (*La novia ya salyó del banyo*).

ideal backdrop to this song. Interestingly, the motif of the *mikveh* appears juxtaposed to the profane, erotic connotations of the sea. Water holds therefore dual significance: it is both a symbol of ritual purification, and a promise of love and fertility.

Through the use of metaphor, the lyrics evoke a poetic atmosphere permeated by an almost tangible tension, both on a personal level (the bride is preparing for a fundamental rite of passage), and societal, as here we also find a mention of concern about the future mother-in-law (*a la mar yo byen me echava, si la sfuegra lisensya me dava*). Finally we also perceive a tension of erotic nature which is represented not only by the motif of the sea-tide, but also by the images of two blooming trees.

The fruit of the quince tree, the sweet and round quince (*bembriyo*) has always had undeniably erotic connotations in the Mediterranean world. In Ancient Greece quinces were associated with the cult of the goddess Aphrodite and used in the course of wedding celebrations to sweeten the breath of the newly-weds. In Spanish culture since the Medieval period, the quince is identified with erotic desire; in this sense we encounter it, for instance, in one of the *Novelas ejemplares*, or *Exemplary Novels* (1613) by Miguel de Cervantes entitled “Novela del Licenciado Vidriera”, [Doctor Glass-Case],³ or in Sebastián de Covarrubias’ *Treasury of the Castilian Spanish Language* (1611).⁴ In modern Spanish literature we find the symbol of the quince in the work of poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), whose poems are permeated by erotic symbolism and the themes of unfulfilled or unrequited love.

3. “Y así, aconsejada de una morisca, en un membrillo toledano dio a Tomás unos destos que llaman hechizos, creyendo que le daba cosa que le forzase la voluntad a quererla.” (Cervantes 2001: 276). [So, by the advice of a Morisca woman, she took a Toledan quince, and in that fruit she gave him one of those contrivances called charms, thinking that she was thereby forcing him to love her.” Transl. by Walter K. Kelly (1881)].
4. In relation to this, Covarrubias in his work *Treasury of the Castilian Spanish Language* refers to the similarity of shape between the quince and the female genitalia (Covarrubias 1995: 747).

The second tree mentioned in the song is the almond tree (*árvol de almendra*), which is also an important symbol, both sacred, and profane. Above all the almond tree symbolises hope and rebirth as it blossoms before its leaves begin to grow. The almond tree and its fruit are also mentioned several times in the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis (43:11), where they are listed among the most precious fruits of the earth.⁵ Furthermore, the almond tree is the symbol of the Tribe of Levi: Aaron's almond rod blossoms to indicate that it will be from this tribe that future priests of the Temple of Jerusalem will be recruited (Numbers 17:23).⁶ And ultimately, a flowering almond bough becomes the image upon which the *menorah*, the candle-holder of the Temple of Jerusalem and symbol of Judaism, will be modelled.⁷

Almonds are also a quintessential element of Spanish culture; their multiple uses in Spanish cuisine make them a frequent motif in Spanish folk poetry and song. In a spiritual context the white almond blossoms are also associated with the purity of the Virgin Mary.

Ultimately, the places where both trees grow and blossom are also significant: the quince tree grows between the sea waves and the river bank (*entre la mar i el río, mos krezyó un árvol de*

5. "And their father Israel said unto them: 'If it be so now, do this: take of the choice of fruits of the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spicery and laudanum, nuts, and almonds;'" [all Biblical quotes from *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text, A New Translation* (see list of sources)].
6. "And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and put forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and bore ripe almonds."
7. Exodus (25:31-33): "And thou shalt make a candlestick of pure gold: of beaten work shall the candlestick be made, even its base, and its shaft; its cups, its knops, and its flowers, shall be of one piece with it. / And there shall be six branches going out of the sides thereof: three branches of the candlestick out of the one side thereof, and three branches of the candlestick out of the other side thereof; / three cups made like almond-blossoms in one branch, a knop and a flower; and three cups made like almond-blossoms in the other branch, a knop and a flower; so for the six branches going out of the candlestick."

bembriyo), and the almond tree appears between the waves and the sea-strand (*entre la mar i la arena, mos krezyó un árvol de almendra*), that is, in the liminal space between two worlds, where the river's fresh water reaches the unfathomable sea, and where the ever-changing sea waves meet firm land. Likewise the bride, within this oneiric, sacred space, emerges from the sea and blossoms into a mature woman.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the example of the song *Ya salyó de la mar la galana*, Sephardic wedding songs are fundamentally anchored within a concrete situational context, and replete with rich symbolism which operates on a variety of semantic levels. With the popularisation of Sephardic song in the second half of the twentieth century, and especially with the subsequent development of the world music genre, it becomes not only de-contextualised, but also de-sacralised. Throughout this process, the wedding song loses its original significance, to become a part of the repertoire of a concrete interpreter. When it becomes appropriated by interpreters in other, non-Sephardic environments, this "alienation" seems twofold: the song loses its original meaning and it becomes a *mere* cultural artifact.

This process, however, does not necessarily need to result in the mere removal of the song from its original context and its banalisation. Through its re-contextualisation, the song acquires new, unexpected connotations, and it can also serve as a medium to express the spirituality of the interpreter. This aspect is particularly relevant at a time when individual spiritual experiences often replace collective, organized spirituality. Last but not least, we must consider the experience of the listener, who internalizes the song and projects onto it his or her own experience and viewpoint, and thus the song can acquire new spiritual dimensions. This, in my opinion, can however only become possible when the informed interpreter approaches the content and symbolic value of the song material with creative humbleness, deference and understanding.

Only in this way can the song, embedded within its new-found context, come alive with new significance, only thus can its contemporary interpretation be truly meaningful.

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Summary

The collective identity of the Sephardic people has always been defined, first and foremost, by their religious identity. The Sacred permeated every aspect of the Sephardic communities' existence. Naturally, this type of mentality got reflected in their traditional song repertory. Although the Judeo-Spanish language, the principal vector of the Sephardic tradition, is nowadays slowly becoming an endangered species, Sephardic songs still represent one of the fundamental markers of Sephardic identity. The Sephardic song heritage remains a timeless landscape wherein the Sephardim nurture their collective memory and imagination; it is the repository of their cultural history, their customs and their relationship with the Sacred. The song *Ya salió de la mar la galana* [The Beauty Emerged from the Sea] was traditionally sung as part of the wedding celebrations in the Sephardic communities of the Eastern Mediterranean, thus forming the song framework of wedding liturgy. Its lyrics describe the preparation of the bride for the wedding ceremony, following her emergence from the ritual bath to her arrival at the wedding canopy. The rich Mediterranean wedding and erotic symbolism of the song is interwoven with religious references and imagery, creating a dreamlike scenery where the Jewish culture meets the cultures of surrounding nations, where East meets West, and where the Sacred meets the Profane.

Key words: Sephardic wedding song; wedding imagery; contemporary Sephardic song interpretation; Judeo-Spanish.