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EQUAL PARTNERS? PROSELYTISING BY AFRICANS AND JEWS IN THE 17TH CENTURY ATLANTIC DIASPORA

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Abstract: This paper examines the processes by which Africans proselytised Sephardic Jews on the coast of West Africa in the 16th and 17th centuries and were in their turn proselytised by Jews both in West Africa and elsewhere in the Atlantic world in the early modern era. Drawing on a wide range of archival and published sources, it shows that these activities were far from unusual in the Atlantic world at the time, and are evidence of a world of receptivity and understanding that belies traditional interpretations of Atlantic history. Analysing the conditions which produced the atmosphere in which such mutual conversions could occur, the paper argues that a relatively equitable balance of power was central to this process. Personal knowledge and human experience were crucial in breaking down cultural barriers in a way which permitted conversion; however, the wider economic forces which facilitated these exchanges were themselves distorting power relations, helping to shape Atlantic history on its more familiar, and intolerant, path.

The Atlantic Sephardic diaspora is one which remains unfamiliar to some historians of the early modern period. Only recently, indeed, has it become a focus of study for mainstream historiography.¹ Yet this was, in the 16th and early 17th centuries, a diaspora which was almost of equal import to the trajectory of Sephardic Jews as that in the Ottoman Empire. Retaining a variable degree of Judaism beneath the cloak of an enforced Christian faith, these Sephardic New Christians became important players on both sides of the Atlantic world: in Madeira, Cabo Verde and São Tomé, and in Brazil, Mexico and Peru.

In the vast geographical space which was occupied by this diaspora, there has now been a reasonable amount of research and publication devoted to the Sephardic New Christians of the American sphere.² Only recently, however, has there been any sustained research and publication on the question of the activity of the diaspora in

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¹ One should cite here particularly the essays in Bernardini and Fiering (eds.) (2001); Wachtel (2001); and Israel (2002).

² Looking at Brazil, one can cite the work of Novinsky (1972) and Salvador (1969) and (1978); for Colombia there is the recent excellent work of Splendiani (1997), whilst for Peru both Millar Carvacho (1997) and Castañeda Delgado/Hernández Aparicio (1989; 1995) have done important work.

Africa. Here, landmark new research by Mark and Horta, Mendes and Green has uncovered a significant amount as to the activities of a group of Sephardim living and trading on the *petite côte* of Senegal in the first three decades of the 17th century (Mark/Horta 2004; Mendes 2004; Green 2005; 2008).³

This research has been very revealing. The Sephardim in question originated from Amsterdam, and belonged to that group of New Christians who had sought religious sanctuary in the Dutch United Provinces and returned to their ancestral faith. Their presence in Senegambia was related to the trade in wax and hides in which the region specialised in these years (Green 2005: 172-3). The community grew to be quite sizeable in the second decade of the 17th century, running its own prayer meetings with the help of Torahs imported from Europe, and having ritual butchers who killed meat according to the laws of kashrut (Mark/Horta 2004: 247, 251). However, following a disastrous trading expedition in 1612 led by the community's leader, Jacob Peregrino, the Sephardic community in Senegal fell into a long decline from which it never recovered (Green 2005: 180-182).

One of the investors in these trading ventures from Amsterdam to West Africa was a certain Diogo Dias Querido. Dias Querido is an interesting figure from the period who has been discussed by various historians in the field (Wiznitzer 1960: 47; Schorsch 2004: 178). He appears to have developed his experience of the Atlantic world through managing a sugar refinery in Bahía, north-eastern Brazil, in the 1580s (Wiznitzer 1960: 47). Here he developed a reputation as a crypto-Jew, and may have been tried by the Portuguese Inquisition during the inquisitorial visit to north-eastern Brazil of 1591-1595.⁴ He arrived in Amsterdam towards the end of the 16th century and was one of the founder members of Beth Yahacob, the first synagogue in the city.

³ The *petite côte* comprises the space between the Cape Verde peninsula where the modern city of Dakar is located in Senegal – the westernmost point of Africa – south to the deltas of Sine-Saloum, a coastline of approximately 150 kilometres. For a more precise view, see the map of the Caboverdean region (downloadable from <http://www.mucjs.org/MELILAH/articles.htm>).

⁴ *Ibid.*; a deposition to the inquisitors of Lisbon after Querido's death noted that, when in Bahía, he had been an intimate of New Christians suspected of Judaizing (IAN/TT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Livro 209, folio 679r).

[2]There is some circumstantial evidence suggesting that Dias Querido's work in Bahía may have brought him into personal contact with the peoples of the Senegambian coast in the 1580s.⁵ This may perhaps explain his willingness to invest heavily in trading voyages to the region once established in Amsterdam, and also perhaps one of the more controversial elements of his Jewish practice in the Dutch United Provinces: for Dias Querido was one of those who actively sought to convert his African slaves to Judaism (Schorsch 2004: 178; see also IAN/TT, *Inquisição de Lisboa*, Livro 59, folio 130v).

The conversion of a Jewish master's slaves to Judaism was in fact far from unknown in Amsterdam, and, later, in the Sephardic colony of Suriname (Arbell 2002: 108). The congregational records of the 1640s reveal several interdictions regarding the participation of African members of the congregation in synagogal services (GAA, Portuguese Jewish Archives, Book 19, folios 173, 224, 281). This is evidence both of a reasonable African contingent in the congregation, and of a hardening of the inclusiveness which had characterised the congregation in its early years, a hardening which itself was probably the corollary of an increasingly racialised discourse as the 17th century unfolded.

At the same time, moreover, as Africans were being converted to Jews in Amsterdam (and elsewhere), an analogous process was occurring in reverse on the West African coast. Sephardim who had taken up residence in Senegambia, and second and third generation Sephardic New Christians residing here and on the Guinea Coast, increasingly adopted elements of African religion.⁶ This was indeed a long-standing process, since as long ago as 1546 an accusation had been made to the Portuguese

⁵ Thus in André Alvares d'Almada's account of the Senegambian region, written in 1578, he stated that the island of Gorée – situated just a few miles to the north of where the subsequent Sephardic communities of Senegambia were located – was a port of call for most of the foreign ships going to Sierra Leone, the pepper coast (Liberia), Brazil and the Spanish Indies. Moreover, says Almada, here they dealt with the mayor of Portudal (sic) – the subsequent centre for Jewish communities in the region – who was the overseer of the Wolof king's property. Almada (1994: 35).

⁶ The region of Senegambia comprises the area between the estuaries of the rivers Senegal and Gambia (the northern section of the modern country of Senegal); the Guinea Coast refers to the land south of the Gambia in what today is southern Senegal, Guiné-Bissau and northern Guinea.

inquisitorial tribunal of Évora that the New Christians who lived on the African coast were adopting elements of African religious practice (A. Teixeira da Mota 1978: 8).⁷

This paper seeks to build on this evidence of a mutual receptivity of Sephardim and the peoples of this part of West Africa towards the religious practices of one another. For in this evidence of accommodation and reciprocity emerge ideas concerning the practice and the relationship of Africans and Europeans in this period which are at odds with some more traditional historiography. The willingness of Africans and Jews to adopt the faiths of one another hints at a clear acceptance by each group of certain common values, and at a level of cultural respect – it is not a world of exclusion, prejudice and unmitigated exploitation.⁸

Thus through this investigative framework we can attempt to answer some critical questions. What was it that allowed distinct groups such as Senegambians and Sephardim to find a shared context for their religious practice? And what was it, by contrast, which allowed this shared context to be overshadowed, permitting a more polarised Atlantic world to emerge? By studying how the process of mutual conversion worked, and how it eventually declined, we can perhaps begin to understand whether the Atlantic world which eventually emerged in the long 18th century had to be as brutal and as tragic as it turned out to be.

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[3]By the early 17th century, one of the most unlikely centres for proselytising activity on the part of Jewry was the coast of West Africa. Many of the Sephardic New Christians who apostasised from Christianity and began to practise elements of Judaism did so after visiting the ports of Senegambia and Upper Guinea.⁹ One of them,

⁷ The accusation stated that they had become polygamous and were indulging in animist rites; however it should be noted that polygamy is not itself universally prohibited by the Jewish faith.

⁸ This is, moreover, a direction in which recent historiography on both the Guinea Coast region and on Creole Societies of the Lusophone world is beginning to move. Lingna Nafafé (2007) argues strongly for a climate of mutual exchange rather than of mutual hostility on the Guinea Coast in this region, whilst the essays on Creole societies in Havik and Newitt (eds.) (2007) emphasise as a whole the need for co-operation in the construction of the Creole world.

⁹ For a full discussion of the role of West Africa in the apostasy of crypto-Jews of the 17th century, see Green (2007c).

Antonio Espinosa, gave a typical account of the evangelical activities of Jews in the port of Cacheu (modern Guiné-Bissau) *circa* 1630:

One day he and his crewmates gathered with four Portuguese men who knew Captain Correa [the captain of the ship in which Espinosa was sailing, who had already tried to convert Espinosa to Judaism] and they all said so many things to [Espinosa] about the Mosaic law, discoursing about it for a long time, and recounting how God had given the law to Moses on the mountain, and how on his descent from it he had found the people of Israel fallen into idolatry, spending more than a whole sheet of paper explaining this to him, so that at the end [Espinosa] decided to follow the Mosaic law himself.¹⁰

However, this evangelical activity was not limited to the New Christians (and Old Christians) who passed through the region. The more devout Sephardim in the area began to proselytise some of their African servants and slaves. A document written in around 1620 referring to the “stubbornness” [*pertinacia*] of the New Christians around the world cited especially the dangers of the New World Amerindians being “perverted” by the many New Christians who were then making their way to the Viceroyalty of Peru via the River Plate. It was noted that:

... the Gentiles [Amerindians] are at great risk of being taught Judaism, as experience has shown that this occurs in some of the provinces of Guinea, where [the people of the Hebrew nation] manage to teach Jewish rites and ceremonies to the Gentiles.¹¹

This general evidence related to the conversion of Africans to Judaism on the Guinea Coast can be supplemented by other findings in the relevant archives. Mulatto Jews belonged to the congregation of Sephardim established in Portudal, Senegambia, in the 1610s (IAN/TT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Livro 58, folio 155r; IAN/TT, Inquisição

¹⁰ AHN, Sección Inquisición, Libro 1031, folios 114v-115r. Original: “y todos le dixerón al reo tantas cosas de la lei de moisses discurrendo el reo mui largo en ellas, y en el modo que dios abia dado la lei de Moisses en el monte, y como bajando del habia hallado que los del pueblo de isrrael abian idolatrado, gastando en esto mas de un pliego de papel, q al cavo el reo se avia resuelto de guardar la dicha lei”.

¹¹ BL, Egerton, MS 344, folios 98r-v. Original: “como por experiencia le tienen visto q hacen en algunas provincias de Guinea, adonde procuran ensenhar las cerimonias y ritos Judaicos a los Gentiles”.

de Lisboa, Livro 205, folio 583v). And moreover there was a widespread anxiety among the Christian community of the Portuguese settlements of West Africa regarding the religious activities of the Sephardim. Thus in a letter of July 30th 1635, the Bishop of Cabo Verde recounted a story which, for him, had all the hallmarks of another Jewish conversion in West Africa. Three African servants had circumcised themselves, although they were Christians; this was a matter of perplexity, since they gave signs of being good Christians: nonetheless, they were put in the stocks and given harsh penance as a warning to others (IAN/TT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Livro 217, folio 475v).

In this last case one can see many of the difficulties which emerge when trying to understand this question of conversion by Africans to Judaism. The bishop of Cabo Verde appeared to assume that circumcision was an irrefutable sign of Jewish influence, and was therefore somewhat confused by the strong signs of Christian faith among these “converts”. Yet circumcision was just as strong a cultural practice for the peoples of the coasts of Senegambia and Guinea as it was for Sephardim. It may well be that there was nothing “Jewish” about this last trait at all, and that the auto-circumcision of these three Africans was merely a melding of their ancestral practice with Christianity.

The problem with such cases, in other words, is that of the perceptions and preconceptions of the sources. There was a certain blurring at the edges in the way in which Sephardim and Africans were perceived by [4]Iberian Christians of the early modern period. This makes specifics as regards the precise ritual activities of Judaism which Africans *may* have adopted in Senegambia elusive. As Sephardim had until recently been the stereotyped “other” of Iberian culture, Africans were often perceived through a Sephardic lens. It was this which led some of the first navigators to reach the Senegambian coast to believe that there were communities of Jews here already – the griots, or praisesingers, whom, like Iberian Jews, lived in ghettos, married within their caste and were buried outside the communal cemetery.¹²

¹² This issue is discussed in much greater detail in Green (2007b), Part I.

In such circumstances, the existence of a corroborative source for the conversions of Africans to Judaism is important, and in this case we are fortunate to have such a source through the existence of the aforementioned converted African Jews who were members of the Amsterdam synagogue in the early 17th century. Here the thorough research of Jonathan Schorsch on the relationship between Africans and Jews in the Atlantic world is of interest. Schorsch notes how no more than 15 Africans were buried in the community cemetery at Oudekerk in the years 1614-30 and 1680-1716 (Schorsch 2004: 178). This implies a thorough integration into the rituals of Judaism, as does the above-cited regulation that Africans could not read Torah portions in the synagogue of Amsterdam – implying that hitherto they had done so.¹³ Although, as Schorsch notes, this must have represented a very small minority of cases, it nonetheless is evidence that such conversions did occur, and therefore supports the evidence noted above that they also occurred in West Africa.

Moreover, that the Sephardic communities of the Atlantic world were open to the conversion of Africans or those of African descent is attested by subsequent developments in the Atlantic. As Arbell has shown, the Dutch colony of Surinam on the northern coast of South America is of particular relevance here. In Surinam, the Sephardic population amounted to something like one third of the total population of free persons in the colony. Some of the Sephardim had sexual relations with African slaves in the colony, and a number of mixed race children were born (Arbell 2002: 108).

Although most of these children had not been born to Jewish mothers, many of them were instructed in the Jewish faith and took the names of Portuguese Jews. In the mid-18th century, as the community gravitated from the plantations towards Paramaribo, the colony's capital, many of these free mulattos became craftsmen and shopkeepers, some becoming quite wealthy. A ruling of 1754 entitled them to be admitted as members of the Jewish community, if not as *yehidim* (full-fledged members), and by

¹³ See above, p.2.

1759 a *siva*, or brotherhood of Jewish mulattos was established known as *Darkhe Sevarim* (The Ways of the Righteous).¹⁴

While this congregation consisted largely of the descendants of male Sephardim, and thus not of non-Jews who had been converted *per se*, the 1787 Hascamoth of the congregation included a provision which made it clear that blacks and mulattos were freely joining the congregation even though they had no Jewish forebears:

About the difference between a full member and a congregant, it is resolved that all Jewish mulattos, blacks, mestizas and castices who carry the name of, or are known to be descended from the Portuguse/Spanish nation, will be considered “Congreganten”. All other Negroes (sic) and Mulatto Jews who want to join voluntarily in the Portuguese Jewish persuasion as “Congregant”, will be obliged to affirm this with their signature at the time of their acceptance, one and for all on equal terms.¹⁵

It is not clear from this Hascamah whether these converts were proselytised or whether they were voluntary congregants attracted in part by a thriving religious community. Yet even if this cannot therefore be taken as evidence of an overt, proselytising effort on the part of the Sephardim in the Atlantic [5]world, it does still show a certain openness and tolerance of difference within the Sephardic community, and a recognition on the part of some that Africans, or those of African origin, could be members of a Jewish community.¹⁶

When one considers this evidence on the conversion of Africans to Judaism, it appears both logical and anomalous. The logic follows on from the fact that, in contrast to the stereotypes which existed – and exist – with regards to the closed nature of the Jewish community, Jews had traditionally been open to the conversion of non-Jews into their fold. As the scholar of the Sephardim, B. Netanyahu, has pointed out, the great Jewish sage born in medieval Iberia, Maimonides, had once

¹⁴ *Ibid.* The *yehidim* constituted the core of the community from which readers of Torah portions, and ritual officers were chosen. The term used is that of the congregation itself.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Note that “congreganten” is the Dutch spelling.

¹⁶ By contrast, the arrival of Ashkenazim in Paramaribo in the late 18th century caused severe tensions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and after a difficult spell of co-existence the Ashkenazim built a separate synagogue. *Ibid.*, 108-111.

written that people of all nations were able to be Jews,¹⁷ while in Roman times Cassius Dio had written that he could not define who the Jews were “except to say that they are a people of different races who follow the laws of the Jews”.¹⁸

Yet in spite of this history of openness there is something anomalous in this story, and this is that it was in opposition to the prevailing trends of the early modern era. For while it is true that the Jewish faith had in ancient and even medieval times been open to people converting from other faiths, it is also true that in Iberia this openness had been severely curtailed by the mid-13th century statutes of Alfonso X “*el sabio*” prohibiting any proselytising activity on the part of Jews (and Moslems).

Nevertheless, the evidence shows that this proselytising is what occurred, at least somewhat, in the early modern Atlantic. What is implied is a certain openness towards Africa and Africans on the part of the Sephardim, and towards Judaism on the part of Africans. It was in fact those Sephardim who had close personal knowledge of Africa and Africans who generally engaged in proselytising activity, men such as Diogo Dias Querido or the slave owners of Surinam. Knowledge and understanding of those of a different culture could bring respect and a desire to integrate, as the Sephardim themselves had discovered in West Africa.

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While, as this paper has already noted, an active Sephardic community did exist on the Senegambian coast in the early 17th century, most of the Sephardic New Christians who came to this part of West Africa in the early modern period did so nominally as Christians. Whilst some of them retained a deep attachment to Judaism, and practised elements of the faith’s rituals, most practised a sort of hybrid faith, maintaining some of the cultural and religious traditions of Judaism and some of those of Christianity; others were outright sceptics of all religion, perhaps hardly surprising

¹⁷ Netanyahu (1997), 6 n.30: any person “who becomes a proselyte anywhere, whether he is an Edomite, an Ammonite, a Moabite, an Ethiopian [African] or of any other nation, and whether male or female, he is permitted to enter the congregation at once”.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

given the experience of their parents' generation in Iberia.¹⁹ As Israel has shown, the categories of "Jew" and "Crypto-Jew" were to a certain degree artificial in the early modern Atlantic; there was more of a continuum between the two groups, with individuals practising greater or lesser degrees of Judaism and Christianity (Israel 2002: 146).

In this situation, where the New Christians in the Caboverdean region of West Africa most often observed a hybridised religious form, it should not be surprising that many of them were willing to adopt elements of African religion. From a very early time in the interactions between Africans and Europeans, it was held that most of those Portuguese trading and settling in Senegambia and Guinea were New Christians. This perception owed a great deal to existing prejudices regarding the ambiguous condition of New [6]Christians in Portugal, and to the perceived ambiguous condition of those so-called *lançados*, Europeans who had literally "thrown themselves" in with African societies:²⁰ both groups were seen as being both part of and yet alien to the Portuguese community. Nevertheless the upshot of this interplay of preconceptions was that a significant proportion of the Portuguese in West Africa were in fact New Christians, since the category of *lançado* threatened Old Christian taboos.²¹

Many of these New Christian *lançados* adapted quickly to cultural practices of West Africa. Already, as we have seen, by 1546 the New Christians of Guinea were said to be adopting elements of African religion.²² Similarly, the most powerful Portuguese in the Senegambian region in the middle of the 16th century, known as Ganagoga, was a New Christian who had made a marriage alliance with the Fulani king (Almada 1994: 36; see also Carreira 1972: 67-8).²³ This can only have been possible through the

¹⁹ The variety of different religious positions of the New Christians in Cabo Verde is exposed fully in Green (2007b).

²⁰ The term "*lançado*" is usually left untranslated; it derives from the Portuguese "*lançar*", to throw, hence my rough translation in the text.

²¹ This is discussed in greater detail in Green (2007b), Part I, Chapters 3 and 5.

²² See above, n.7.

²³ "Ganagoga" meant "someone who speaks all languages" in the language of the Bainung people of Casamance (southern Senegal). Almada says that this is how this individual was known in the region, whereas his original name was João Ferreira. Almada is in fact the only source we have for this individual's New Christian origins, and Ganagoga is only very briefly mentioned in one other source for the period.

willingness of Ganagoga to assimilate into the dominant cultural atmosphere of the Fulani of Futa Toro.²⁴

Indeed, the trajectory of the New Christians in this region of West Africa in the 16th and 17th century centuries is largely that of a small minority group gradually being assimilated. While in the 17th century New Christian escapees from the Inquisition such as Alvaro Gonçalves Frances and João Rodrigues Freire continued to practise Jewish rituals in the region, and to convert New Christians to crypto-Judaism, their children became fully assimilated.²⁵ Alvaro's son Jorge, for instance, married a certain Crispina Peres who was later tried by the Inquisition in Lisbon on charges of witchcraft, having performed certain local religious practices in the port of Cacheu; in his testimony to the inquisitors, written in the mid-1660s, Jorge Gonçalves Frances recounted how there were only four people in Cacheu who followed the Catholic ritual without incorporating any pagan rituals²⁶ As there remained not an inconsiderable population of New Christians there at this date, this is evidence that many of them had adopted African religious practice.

The religious world which the Sephardim found on the coast of Guinea was one that was both familiar and strange. During her trial by the Inquisition in the 1660s, Jorge Gonçalves Frances's wife, Crispina Peres, was accused of sorcery and worshipping fetishes, of organising pagan ceremonies on one of Jorge Gonçalves Frances's boats which involved a libation with cow's blood, of using local healers when her daughter fell ill in an attempt to discover who had poisoned her, and of keeping a bewitched snake.²⁷ This belief in and use of bewitched snakes in the cultural practice of this

²⁴ The Fulani, also known as the Peul, are a nomadic people who can be found from the Futa Toro region of northern Senegal through to Hausaland in northern Nigeria. In Senegal, their lands bordered the Wolof kingdoms to the east. There is also a considerable Fulani grouping in modern Guinea, which originated after a migration to the south led by the Fulani king Koli Tenguela in the 16th century. The Fulani have historically been thought of as an outcast group in West African societies, not only because of their nomadism but also since they have a markedly different appearance to other peoples in the region, being very tall and light-skinned. Ethnographers dispute as to whether they migrated from the Yemeni region of Saudi Arabia or rather from ancient Egyptian civilisations. For a more detailed grasp of the peoples of the region, see the "Peoples and Cultures" map (downloadable from <http://www.mucjs.org/MELILAH/articles.htm>).

²⁵ A full account of these practices and activities is found in Green (2007b): for Alvaro Gonçalves Frances see Part III, Chapter 3; for João Rodrigues Freire, see Part IV, Chapter 3.

²⁶ The best account of this is Havik (2004), 107-20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-8.

region of Africa is an ancient one that remained current into the 20th century, as emerged in the famous autobiography of the Guinean writer [7]Camara Laye, *L'Enfant Noir*, in which Laye described how – in the 1930s – his father kept a certain black snake which warned him of all that was to happen (Green 2002: 72).²⁸

Yet to go with this sense of foreignness were ritual practices which were familiar. Circumcision was commonplace. The cultures of the Guinea Coast were matrilineal, in keeping with the matrilineality of the Jewish faith (Newitt 1992: 42). And though polygamy was practised, this is not itself universally prohibited by the Jewish faith. Instead the practice of diasporic Jews has often been to follow the marital customs of their host cultures, that is to be polygamous among the Moslems and monogamous among the Christians. Given this heritage of adaptability, the demands of polygamy would have been acceptable to many New Christians in West Africa.

In these circumstances one must recognise that there was a certain degree of inevitability in the adoption of African religious practice by these Sephardic New Christians. Where there were very few Jews, or even crypto-Jews, assimilation into the dominant cultural praxis was an obvious choice. By the mid-17th century those who genuinely wanted to be Jews were able to go to Amsterdam and London, or to the nascent communities in the Caribbean, as well as to the Ottoman Empire. These were areas to which the African coast had a long-standing connection, and thus those New Christians who failed to go were, by default, opting for the adoption of African religious practice.

This might imply that the choice of whether or not to adopt African rituals was down to the Sephardim themselves, were it not for an important additional datum. This is that the only region in this part of West Africa which had a recognised synagogue, Senegambia, was a region where many of these cultural characteristics did not pertain. The cultures in Senegambia were patrilineal, not matrilineal like those of Guinea (Havik 2004: 26-7; Brooks 2003: 51-2). This was moreover a region heavily influenced by Islam, the religion of the dominant Wolof people of the region. These

²⁸ Camara Laye's masterpiece, *Le Regard du Roi*, was reissued as *The Radiance of the King* by New York Review of Books in 2001. This novel also references the use of snakes in the ritual of the Guinea coast.

cultural factors were crucial to the existence of the Jewish community in Senegambia. Judaism was a faith recognised and discussed in the *Qur'an*, while the existence of a patrilineal culture made intermarriage and integration into the host community difficult (*ibid.*). In these circumstances, it was much easier for the Sephardim to retain their own community and their separate practices which were recognised by the dominant religion of the region, Islam.

Paradoxically, it was in fact precisely the cultural points of similarity in the region of Guinea south of the Gambia river – matrilineality in particular – which made it easier for Sephardim to assimilate into the host culture and to lose their distinctive Jewishness. The conversion of the Jews to African religious practice was, therefore, whilst apparently a choice on their part, influenced by complex cultural factors which depended upon African realities and decisions.

This reveals that in the case of the conversions both of Africans to Judaism and of Jews to African religions, the main accent of emphasis for the conversion resided with the proselytiser rather than the proselytised. In this sense, Africans and Sephardim were equal partners in the complex cultural interactions which accompanied the rise of the Atlantic world in the early modern era. Each group had the cultural facility both to open to another cultural practice, and to accept the other group into their practice. And this is of vital importance, since this reality hints at a level of potential co-operation and understanding which is at odds with the general perception of the trajectory of the Atlantic world in these years.

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It is perhaps a melancholic truism that few movements are as new as they may seem. The roots of many innovations may well be seen in previous developments. Often, a moment of brilliance in art or literature [8] is itself derivative of something else; and the same can be seen in social change, even in a space like the early modern Atlantic, which was in so many ways an entirely novel space, and an early prototype for the sort of porous internationalism so common in the 21st century.

This conversion of Africans and Jews to the religions of one another appears as something of a surprise. But it is a surprise to readers of this paper perhaps largely because it is not a subject which has hitherto been given much attention. To the individuals involved, and in the time and space in which they moved, the reality would have been very different – and not so much of a surprise.

Firstly, one must recognise that from the moment of African-European contact on the coast of Guinea, a tradition developed of the conversion of Africans to the dominant European religion, Christianity. This was of course most marked through the onset of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The entire moral justification of this trade was couched in the terms of the “saving” of African souls through their conversion to Christianity.²⁹ The islands of Cabo Verde were originally something of a holding ground for recently enslaved Africans, where the new slaves were instructed in the rudiments of Christianity, “converted”, and then shipped across the Atlantic to continue with their “saved” existence elsewhere.

The importance of the conversion of Africans to Christianity in the rising ideology of the Atlantic world in the early modern era is underlined by the perception of Africans once this process had been completed. For, unlike the Amerindians, African slaves were seen as falling under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition in America – as, in other words, fully rational humans (Thornton 1998: 141; see also Green 2007c: 37). This therefore emphasised the role of conversion in the moral underpinning of the slave trade and in the economic fabric of the Atlantic world.

The key in this process transcended mere hypocrisy. What was at stake was the conversion of the subjugated majority to the religion practised by the dominant minority – that is, to the religion of the dominant power in the space in question. And this was something which in fact was in keeping with other trends in areas influenced by the Iberian world in this period.

²⁹ Here the authorities followed Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas in asserting that one part of mankind had been set aside by nature to be slaves in the service of masters, and that such a slave depended on his master to exercise his choices for him. Russell-Wood (1978), 33-34.

One must, for instance, recall that there was a precedent for this process of conversion even in the recent history of the Sephardim themselves. As the brilliant scholars of the Sephardim Netanyahu and Roth have convincingly argued, many of the Jews of Spain had converted to Christianity entirely voluntarily in the century between 1391 and 1492 (Roth 2002: 33-45; more generally, Netanyahu 1966, Kamen 1997, Green 2007a). While there had been some initial violence, the conversions which followed the fiery preaching of St Vincent Ferrer and the debates at Tortosa in the early 15th century were due rather to the failure of leadership and intellect in the Jewish community than to the conversions having been mostly forced (Roth 2002: 45ff).

Nor was this preceding history of conversion in Iberia limited to the Jews. Following the forced conversion of the Moslems of Spain in the first 20 years of the 16th century, many of them genuinely desired to adopt the Christian faith. The development of the Moslem apostasy in Spain was due principally to the abject failure of the religious authorities to institute adequate instruction of the *moriscos* rather than to any inherent seditiousness of the Islamic “fifth column”.³⁰ In 1570, the *moriscos* of Valencia asked to be given priests and have churches built for them; otherwise, as they quite reasonably pointed out, “[we] will never be good Christians” (BL, Egerton MS 1510, folio 153v).

Moreover, one should not believe that this history of conversion was limited to Africans, Jews and Moslems. A common example of denunciations in the archives of the Portuguese Inquisition relate to [9]Portuguese residents in the region of Ceuta (Morocco), then in Portuguese hands, adopting the Islamic faith – that is, assimilating to the dominant creed of North Africa. Elsewhere in North Africa, in 1623 Amador Lozado, the captain of the fort at Arguim off the Mauritanian coast, was accused of being a secret Moslem, living with Moslem concubines and oppressing all the Christians in the fortress (IAN/TT, Inquisição de Lisboa, Livro 211, folios 192r-193r). Nor was this process confined to Africa, since in 1585 the inquisitors of Goa complained about the Old Christians who had gone to live among the Moors and converted (IAN/TT, CGSO, Livro 100, folio 15r, 17r).

³⁰ This argument is set out in detail in Green (2007a), Chapter 7.

There were, in other words, many contemporary examples to hand of peoples adopting the religions of others with whom they had come into close contact. In this sense there was nothing unusual about the process which has been outlined in this paper with regard to the Africans of the Upper Guinea Coast and the Sephardim. Yet as these examples also reveal, this process of conversion usually occurred when one or other of the groups was in a position of dominance within a given space. Thus what these stories of conversion can tell us is something about both the political and social condition of various nodes in the Atlantic at this time, and how the Africans and Sephardim viewed one another.

This is a subject which has recently entered the mainstream of Atlantic historiography following Jonathan Schorsch's magisterial book, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Schorsch 2004). Schorsch's analysis reveals the diversity of attitudes of Sephardim towards Africans and African-descended peoples in the Atlantic world, ranging from outright racism to co-operation and conversion. This range of attitudes suggests that the adoption of racist attitudes in the Atlantic was by no means an inevitability. Many other types of relationship were possible at the first meetings of Africans and Europeans, including those of reciprocity and co-operation.³¹

From the foregoing analysis, it would appear that central elements in this framework of reciprocity were personal experience and contact in a space with a relatively equitable balance of power. Those Sephardim who did proselytise their slaves in Amsterdam appear, like Diogo Dias Querido, often to have been those who had personal knowledge of the African coast. At the same time, this contact was couched within a political reality where the African kings were undisputed political masters of the coast.³² Personal relationships with Africans derived from a sphere where there was an equitable balance of power which did not foster prejudice, but rather a belief in a common, shared humanity, and in the applicability of religious tropes to peoples of different backgrounds.

³¹ This idea is explored in Nafafé (2007).

³² For an example proving this power dynamic see Green (2005), 177, 182-3.

Yet at the same time, the first 150 years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade had done much to weaken the power of the polities of Senegambia and Upper Guinea. The arrival of more horses had challenged existing military relationships and led to the fragmentation of the Wolof empire into 5 sub-kingdoms; it may also have weakened the hold of the empire of Mali over the principality of Kaabu, in modern Guiné-Bissau, leading to a power transfer from Niani, the previous capital of Mali located on the border of modern Guinea and Mali, to Songhai, further east into the central Sahel (Levtzion 1980: 96; Curtin 1975: 9). Thus, although personal contacts between Sephardim and Africans could lead to reciprocity and shared purpose, these contacts occurred within a wider framework where the conditions necessary for these harmonious relationships – an equitable balance of power – were being eroded.

One cannot therefore say that the rise of modern racism and prejudice in the Atlantic world was an inevitability. The shared conversions of Africans and Sephardim outlined in this paper, and the conditions in which they occurred, belie this familiar hypothesis. Yet at the same time, the conditions for relationships based on mutual humanity were eroded by economic conditions from the very moment that these relationships began. And thus, in spite of this paper's excursus into a secret history with more positive overtones, does the trajectory of Atlantic history retain its classical aura of tragic inevitability.

[10] ABBREVIATIONS

AHN	Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid
BL	British Library
CGSO	<i>Conselho Geral do Santo Officio</i> (documentary resource in IAN/TT)
GAA	Gemeentearchief, Amsterdam
IAN/TT	Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon

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