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Identity Entrepreneurs among Immigrant Minority Groups

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Abstract

This paper examines young leaders of ethnic minority groups among immigrants from Islamic countries in Israel, who led the struggle for legitimization and redefinition of the Israeli public space. They are, in fact, "identity entrepreneurs", who initiated and led a cultural revival, and acted as central agents in the dynamics of ethnic tradition continuity, while returning selectively to ethnic sources. The syncretism that they adopted in the renewal of their ethnic celebrations was an act of struggle for their right to become integrated in the national space as ethnic "others".

Keywords: immigrants, identity, tradition, syncretism, leaders, minority

Introduction

Mass immigration of Jews to Israel after its establishment in 1948 brought 740,000 immigrants – 54.6% from North Africa and Asia, including about 124,000 from Iraq and Kurdistan (Tzimhoni, 1991). Immigrants from Morocco – which this paper addresses – were the largest group (58.5%) among North African immigrants (Lissak, 2000).

During the 1950s and 1960s, following the establishment of the State of Israel, the national and cultural hegemony applied a cultural strategy of assimilation, which was particularly used for immigrants from Islamic countries, whose culture was perceived as 'Arabic' and thus inferior (Raz-Karkotzkin, 2007). Consequently, immigrants were expected to shed their 'negative' cultural characteristics: language, music and literature. The immigrants were considered in need of modernization, re-socialization, and were compelled to adopt the dominant Israeli culture, which was principally Eastern European (Dahan-Kaleb, 2007). The immigrants were directed to towns in Israel's geographic periphery, thus perpetuating ethnic inequality (Tzfadia & Yiftahel, 2004).

The central object of the stereotypical attitude was immigrants from Morocco, who were considered 'bad material', and their immigration was regulated by selection (Lasker, 2006). During the 1970s to 1990s, Moroccan Jews and their descendants were the largest Jewish-ethnic group in Israel, and at the end of the 1980s comprised 13% of its population (Sikron, 2004). However, the negative imagery that appeared about them in the Israeli press and public discourse during the 1950s-1960s called into question their ability to integrate into the Zionist revolution (Tzur, 2001).

In the 1980s, there were about 100,000 Kurdish-Jewish immigrants living in Israel (Tzabar, 1981). They had contributed extensively to the national enterprise of rebuilding the country (Yonah, 1989), but similarly to the fate of North African immigrants – they were not recognized in Zionist historiography. They were categorized by the disparaging label '*Ana Kurdi*', which became a synonym for someone ignorant, stubborn, incompetent and frugal (Tzabar, 2009).

The paternalistic approach to absorbing immigrants from Islamic countries and their placement at the political, economic and geographic margins led to protest actions, which can be categorized by two fields – socio-political and cultural. During the 1960s and 1970s, on the socio-political level, social protest groups were established in underprivileged neighborhoods inhabited by immigrants from North Africa, primarily Morocco (Dahan-Kaleb, 2007).

The segregation and marginality fed the immigrants' ethnic identity consciousness, and laid the foundation for it becoming a political resource. These politics of identity were manifested in a strategy of political organization on an ethnic basis, which did not achieve significant results. Another strategy was political integration in non-ethnic parties (Herzog, 1984). The dramatic political turnover in 1977, during which the Likud party rose to power ending the long-standing hegemony of MAPAI (the Labor party), is explained by the

majority of immigrants from Islamic countries voting for the oppositional Likud party (Filk, 2006). From the 1970s onward, various political parties – primarily Likud – included representatives from the periphery, but they were still a minority in the Knesset, and were blocked from leadership positions in the parties (Filk, 2006).

The cultural response of the immigrants from Islamic countries during the first decades of the State of Israel is relevant to this paper. The stereotypical attitude to their culture on one hand affected their negative self-image (Regev, 2003), and on the other hand gave rise to a separate culture in various areas such as music, religious practices, celebrations, ceremonies, etc. (Yaar & Shavit, 2003).

Thus, local cultures developed, expressed by the preservation of traditional patterns of the countries of origin, which Regev (2003) called 'micro-cultures', meaning frameworks in which small groups maintain cultural patterns that the public culture (i.e. the media, education system and the arts) label as marginal.

Following the political turnover and multicultural global processes, from the 1970s onward, immigrant groups (including those from Islamic countries) demanded legitimization of their identities and making them an integral part of the collective Israeli identity. At the same time, there were segregation processes and attempts to reinforce group boundaries to protect their identities. The groups struggled for recognition and belonging according to their interests, the types of resources at their disposal (economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital), and bargaining power (which is linked to the size of the group) (Regev, 2011).

This dynamic of identities in Israeli society, in which segregated groups such as immigrants from Morocco, Kurdistan and Ethiopia managed to change the central social ethos, was led by young leaders. These are in fact 'identity entrepreneurs' (Eisenstadt, 2013), who not only protested against their ethnic discrimination, but also inserted their particular cultural identity symbols into the mainstream Israeli public, and participated in its formation.

Dynamic Identity in a Postmodern Society

The sociological discussion of identities is relatively new, and is linked to the rise of individualism in the 19th century and the undermining of nationalism as a 'natural' identity in the mid-20th century (Shavit, Sasson-Levy & Ben-Porat, 2013). Hall (1996) argued that following the dismantlement of comprehensive identity patterns such as tribe and family, a new perception developed by which individual identities are not congenital or essential, but rather the product of social structuring that is shaped and changed through interactions between the state, social discourse and social institutions. The dynamic portrayal of identities is illustrated very well by Bauman (2000) as 'liquid modernity'.

According to Weeks (1991), contemporary perceptions, affected by postmodern discourse, argue that identity is shaped in different discourse

fields, and is therefore often divided and is temporary by nature. Thus, identities are 'invented categories', products of cultural meanings that develop under specific circumstances. The challenge and divergence of existing identity configurations have established new identities that are made up of different and often contradictory identity parts in the social and cultural space (Sasson-Levy, 2006).

Many theoreticians have emphasized that people who belong to a minority feel connected to one another not only by a common race, nationality, culture and history, but also by a common experience of discrimination and social inferiority (Hutnik, 1991; Romanucc-Ross & De Vos, 1995). Hutnik (1991) claimed that ethnic identity is a sense of personal identification with an ethnic group, and identification of the individual as one who belongs to that group. Nash (1989) noted that ethnic identity is defined not only by how one perceives oneself, but is also the product of social perception.

Shapira (1997) underlined that collective identity is to a large extent a reflection of the accepted social ethos and norms at a given time, and does not necessarily reflect the sub-identities in that society. Furthermore, design and positioning, power and negotiation patterns emphasize that identity is political, and is created, shaped and interpreted by overt and covert power coordinates in society.

Immigration is a situation that enables encounters between cultures, during which immigrants build their personal and group identity according to the nature of the encounter with the host society. At present, due to multicultural policies prevalent in most western countries, immigrants usually find ways to contain their various identities simultaneously, using each in varying social contexts (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 2001).

Berry presented four known strategies of inter-cultural relationships from the minority group's perspective: assimilation, segregation, integration and marginality. Each approach indicates the degree of commitment and identification with the culture of origin on one hand, and the majority culture on the other hand. In addition, Berry noted that the ideology and policy of the dominant group are an important component of immigrants' integration and the relationships between ethnic groups (Berry, 1977, 1992, 2004).

Mirski (2005) wrote that immigrants are torn between old ties to their homeland and new emotional ties to their new country. Therefore, immigration can cause distress, but is also an opportunity to shape an identity and self-representation through focused channels such as national identity and cultural belonging. She emphasized that immigrants' inter-cultural conflict could be solved by integration between elements that were preserved from their home country and elements adopted in the new country.

This paper examines two identity entrepreneurs, who were prominent leaders of minority immigrant groups in Israel: Shaul Ben-Simhon and Haviv Shimoni. In the 1970s, they established organizations of immigrants from Morocco (Ben-Simhon) and Kurdistan (Shimoni), and organized widespread cultural activities, primarily demonstrated by the renewal of traditional ethnic spring celebrations, which this paper focuses on. These young leaders

experienced both their culture of origin and the host culture. Therefore, I believe that a process of syncretism took place in their identity and behavior patterns, which means combining religious and cultural elements and creating a new tradition (Stewart & Shaw, 1994).

Syncretism indicates a process of change in personal and group identity and the configurations of this process. It develops consciously, but also unintentionally (Leopold & Jensen, 2004). The process occurs mainly among minority groups, and creates variations of tradition and modernity (Shils, 1981). Syncretism is often a minority's strategy to survive or to penetrate the center (Stewart & Shaw, 1994).

Adopting the syncretism approach, I support the criticism of the classic assimilation model, and concludes that various ethnic identities may serve as a resource for immigrants, and they can exist alongside cultural integration (Bakalian, 1992). Such a critical perception also emphasizes the multiplicity of immigrants' social places and adjustment tracks (Zhou, 1997).

I contend that the syncretism of the ethnic revival process by Shaul Ben-Simhon and Haviv Shimoni was deliberate, and that they consciously adopted it as an act of opposition to the dominant host culture. By means of selectively returning to their ethnic roots, they chose to create a new syncretic product, which would serve their goals of legitimization and mobility of their unique culture into the Israeli mainstream culture.

Examining the identity of minority group leaders is an important universal issue, because these leaders have crucial influence on immigration absorption and the effectiveness of the host country's efforts to accept them. In view of the massive waves of immigration to Europe, this study could help understand protest patterns of young leaders and to examine the containment mechanisms of ethnic minority cultures in multicultural societies.

Methodology

During Israel's first decades, media coverage of the communities of immigrants from Islamic countries was meager – an allegory of their marginal social and cultural status. However, since the 1970s, when the ethnic revival of these groups started, the information about them in the press became more abundant.

This paper is based on the content analysis of articles in the Israeli press. The journal "Hithadshut" (Revival) published by the Organization of Kurdistan Jews (1973-2000) was also an important source of information. For researchers, readers and immigrants from Kurdistan in Israel, this journal filled a dual role – as a source of information about their culture and history, and active reinforcement of their ethnic identity (Bezalel, 28/7/1978).

These primary sources included items about decisions and activities of the ethnic organizations, minutes of meetings, interviews with leaders, lives of the Jewish communities in Islamic countries, absorption difficulties in Israel, biographies, traditional customs, and so on. Extensive space was devoted to

reviewing the ethnic spring celebrations – Mimouna (of the Moroccan immigrants) and Saharana (of the immigrants from Kurdistan) – their organization, location, artistic program, public figures who would participate, speeches, etc. These items could provide a linear measure of how these celebrations developed in Israel.

Comparing the media coverage of the Mimouna and the Saharana is inevitable. Whereas the Mimouna has become a famous event, and the media had a significant role in making it a national holiday, reports on the Saharana were limited, which seemingly reflects its status as a sectorial ethnic celebration. I would also conclude that the interest of the press was largely due to the size of the ethnic group and its electoral-political power.

Shaul Ben-Simhon – Identity entrepreneur of immigrants from Morocco

Shaul Ben-Simhon was born in 1929 in Fez, Morocco, and immigrated to Israel with his family in 1948. He was a member of MAPAI (the ruling party), and worked in The Ministry of Trade & Industry. In 1956, he was appointed secretary of the Ashdod Workers Council, and in 1966, he was a member of the central committee of the Histadrut Labor Federation. It should be noted that although Ben-Simhon was a MAPAI political activist, he was known for his anti-establishment views and actions. He was later a member of the Israel Workers Party (RAFI), which split from MAPAI, and eventually reunited to form the Labor Party in 1985.

Shaul Ben-Simhon initiated the first public Mimouna celebration in Israel. The Mimouna was an important holiday in the Jewish communities of North Africa, celebrated in the spring on the day after Passover ended. One of the common explanations of the name Mimouna is 'luck', and North African Jews believed that this day should be celebrated to bless the year with prosperity (Mamman, 1991).

The Mimouna eve celebrations included a festive prayer, a table laden with symbols related to crops, and hospitality. On the day itself, the celebrations were held outside, with food, song, music, and dancing. One of the central messages of the celebration was unity and solidarity between the Jews and their Muslim neighbors (Hirschberg, 1957; Sharabi, 2009).

In an interview, Ben-Simhon emphasized that he had organized the first public Mimouna in Israel with his friends in the Organization of Jews from Fez in Israel, with no establishment intervention (Bar-Yoda, 1990). Ben-Simhon explained the severe recession at that time increased the unemployment, bitterness, social alienation and inter-ethnic tensions. He and his friends considered protest activities, but they realized that it would take too long and that they lacked the power to fight the establishment, so Ben-Simhon suggested that they hold a social gathering on Mimouna day.

In 1966, about 300 people (originally from Fez, Morocco) celebrated the Mimouna in a forest near Jerusalem, and decided to meet again next year. Ben-Simhon said that there was enormous thirst for this get-together because it

united people who had been dispersed all over the country. The meeting of friends and family members was also a show of force (Ben-Simhon, 1990). Ben-Simhon also mentioned the cultural motive of renewing Mimouna celebrations in Israel:

The slogan 'integration of exiles', meant that I had to be integrated into the establishment. I was no longer I, I was he, and I must deprecate myself vs. the establishment's togetherness. At that time in Israel, there was extreme cultural intractability, but politically we wanted the right to be different, to be who we were, which today is called cultural pluralism, and no one doubts it. We felt that the slogan 'integration of exiles' meant that you weren't you, and in order to be you, you had to be someone else, you had to be cancelled. Moroccon Jews came here to be Jews according to the traditions of their ancestors… We were not satisfied with what we had here, so we wanted to highlight our uniqueness, and that, in my view is a good thing. I can say that nowadays that perception has won. There is an atmosphere of tolerance and cultural pluralism in Israeli society, and you have the right to be different. When we started, we were very small, so it was political. At the beginning, it was a political-social perception (Ben-Simhon, 1990, 15).

We see that the initiative to renew the Mimouna was 'bottom-up' – from the Moroccan community, and not 'top-down' – from Israel's leadership. Ben-Simhon's enterprise to renew the celebrations in their public form stemmed mainly from political motives. He saw the celebrations as an important means to create a meeting between North African immigrants who were dispersed all over the country, and to nurture their ethnic unity, culture and identity. By means of the meeting itself and the social cohesion, he and his friends wanted to show force and raise a voice of protest, in order to promote the affairs of North African immigrants, who had been marginalized politically, economically, culturally and geographically in Israel. Therefore, the renewal of the Mimouna celebrations can be seen as an act that was linked to other protest actions led by Moroccan immigrants.

Since its first years, the members of the Organization of Moroccan Jews in Israel (established in 1968 by Ben-Simhon) made every effort to increase the number of celebrators at the central celebration in Jerusalem and other celebrations throughout the country. The organizers viewed the number of participants and the integration of all ethnic groups as a measure of their success and a means to promote their demand to legitimize the Mimouna as a national holiday.

The organizers' goals were reflected in the celebration's messages, pattern and content. They repeatedly expressed their aim to make the Mimouna known to all, and its values a unifying factor for the Jewish people (see: Barash, 24/4/1973). Ben-Simhon expressed the organizers' hope to "insert this nice and colorful celebration into every home in Israel, even Ashkenazi homes. We will try, through it, to unite the nation, to unify ethnic groups, to integrate exiles, and to nurture love, brotherhood and fraternity among us." (Barash, 11/4/1969)

By means of the unifying Mimouna messages, the organizers in fact wanted to demonstrate ethnic force, and to show that their cultural heritage was

part of the national canon. The slogan of unity, which was one of the celebration's main messages in Morocco, served the process of the intentional mobility of the celebration and its entire ethnic group to the center.

The heads of the Moroccan community and its rabbis traditionally hosted heads of state and politicians, and the celebration sites served as arenas of election propaganda and political struggles, totally contradictory to the unifying messages of the celebration (see: Golan, 30/4/1981; Kipper, 27/4/1992). Party representatives used the opportunity to appear, make speeches, shake hands and influence the electoral mass. Heads of state mentioned in their speeches that Mimouna was a celebration of all the Jewish people and part of the Israeli culture, and thus legitimized its inclusion in the national mainstream (see: Hazut, 29/4/1997; Yehezkeli, 27/4/2000).

The heads of the Moroccan community also wanted a show of force through the celebrations, as Ben-Simhon admitted, "I think we used the politicians and not the politicians used us" (Bar Yoda, 1990). This indicates that the community leaders saw the celebrations as an opportunity to advertise themselves, to strengthen their ties with the national elite, and to promote local community interests.

The increasing volume of the celebrations, including in dozens of kibbutzim (communal agricultural settlements), most of which were populated by North African Jews, and the participation of politicians, gradually led to the institutionalization and public acknowledgement of the Mimouna as a national celebration part of the civil religion. Typical state symbols such as the IDF and Police Force are integrated into the celebration, which enjoys both municipal and national funding.

To add ethical standards to the celebrations, the organizers expanded the traditional elements, and presented the culture and achievements of Moroccan Jewry in exhibitions at the celebration sites. However, the Mimouna customs, which were moved to a different time and different conditions, also changed, received a new interpretation in Israel and embraced Israeli content such as Mimouna celebrations in public buildings, appearances by singers and choruses from other communities, Israeli food and dances, and hosting guests and public figures from all ethnic groups.

The Israeli nature of the Mimouna celebration also stemmed from the increasing number of participants, many of whom had no connection to Morocco. The authenticity of the celebration could not be maintained, when many of the second- and third-generation of Moroccan immigrants choose to keep the customs selectively. Nevertheless, the Mimouna organizers are also largely responsible for the Israeliness of the celebrations. They emphasized that their goal was to create a popular, traditional, non-religious celebration, which all Israelis could embrace (Ben-Simhon, 1990).

The revival of the Mimouna, which was the crowning glory of the ethnic-cultural activity of the leaders of Moroccan Jews in Israel, headed by Shaul Ben-Simhon, served as a role model for the revival of additional ethnic celebrations in Israel (Goldstein, 1985; Weingrod, 1979). Minority group leaders of immigrants to Israel from Kurdistan (as we will see), Iran, Georgia

and more recently Ethiopia, adopted the Mimouna strategy and introduced their own ethnic versions.

Haviv Shimoni – Identity Entrepreneur of Immigrants from Kurdistan

In 1971, the National Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel was founded at the initiative and with the leadership of Haviv Shimoni up to his death in 1994. He was born in Kurdistan in 1933, and his family immigrated to Israel in 1936 (Yaakov, 2000; Yonah, 2003). He was active in the Labor Party, and a member of its secretariat. He worked at the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, and was a member of the Jerusalem City Council. From 1974 to 1977, Shimoni was a Knesset member, and worked vigorously for underprivileged populations and integration of the culture of immigrants from Islamic countries into school curriculums (Saadon, 2003).

At the first convention of the organization, Shimoni demanded that the government takes responsibility for equal integration of immigrants from Islamic countries in general and Kurdish Jews in particular in the social and cultural life of Israel. He said, "The process of shaping Israeli society is a process that should include all the tribes, and should express the beautiful values of the various communities, because integration cannot be one-way… Integration is only possible between equals as regards their spiritual, educational and human values… The Israeli government and the leadership of the Labor movement are required to strengthen us in discovering our self-identity and self-worth, and this community will became an equal and non-different part of the newly formed society in Israel" (Shimoni, 1973).

Shimoni and his friends founded their organization under the influence of Ben-Simhon, one of the prominent leaders of the Jewish-Moroccan community in Israel. However, unlike Ben-Simhon, the leaders of the Kurdish-Jewish community, most of who were active in the Labor Party, did not intend to lead a political protest. Shimoni clearly declared, for example, in 1978, "This organization was established to fill a void. It has no political objectives, did not and will not. We are not a political organization; we are a cultural, social, educational body. We laid serious foundations so that our heritage is not lost" (Shimoni, 1978a).

In my opinion, their lack of political activism at the time was rooted in their years-long loyalty (and that of most Kurdish Jews) to the ruling Labor party (Yonah, 2003), and from the community's weak electoral power.

Shimoni and the other leaders were determined to remove the stereotypical derogative image of '*ana kurdi*', and emphasize their excluded culture. In the 1990s, Shimoni explained that the background for establishing the organization was fear that the community's culture would disappear, particularly vs. its members' suffering from a negative label and the fact that they were a demographic minority compared to the large Moroccan community. He clarified his organizations' goals:

I'm not saying we should live in the State of Israel today as Kurds, but such a community cannot disappear. In the 1970s, the young generation's repression of its sources and heritage was a form of disaster for the community and its legacy. We were a minority that almost vanished, so, with my friends, I started to act to revive our culture and heritage. We wanted to increase Kurds' self-esteem; there was thirst to learn, to return to our roots. We want Israeli culture to be influenced by our culture and the achievements of the Kurdish community. We want integration, but such that shows our part as much as any other community in Israeli life" (Loya, 1990).

This statement indicates a leader's realistic viewpoint, caring about the future of his ethnic group, versus stronger cultural and demographic forces. Shimoni emphasizes two trends in his declarations, which to him and the other leaders are not contradictory, and both undermine the 'melting pot' perception – preserving Kurdish culture, on one hand, and integrating in Israeli society on the other hand. Their call is not for unity from uniformity but for unity from variedness.

With the establishment of the organization, Shimoni and his partners began extensive activity to preserve the cultural assets of the Kurdish community such as establishing a scholarship fund to research the community, producing films, organizing conferences and cultural evenings, a dance group and workshops, publishing a journal (*Hithadshut* – Revival), and renewing the Saharana celebrations in the public sphere in Israel.

The Saharana was traditionally celebrated by Kurdish Jews as a multi-day nature festival starting the day after Passover. Communities would leave their villages and camp out for several days, celebrating spring's arrival, which symbolizes the renewal of nature and of social and economic life. The celebration's features included rejoicing, connections to the land, and intricate family and social ties that functioned as social solidarity, and were manifested by traditional food, common meals, games, hosting Muslim neighbors, and traditional singing and dancing.

The first public Saharana in Israel, organized by the Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel, was held in 1975 on Sukkot for three days in Yardena and Bet-Yosef, which were populated by Kurdish Jews, and its format was spontaneous. The following celebrations, probably due to budgeting concerns of the participants' inability to lose workdays, were held every other year and lasted only one day. The celebrations were more organized and featured a clear and structured ceremonial pattern (Brill, 10/10/1980; Lavi, 3/10/1977; Lavi, 1978; Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel website).

The leaders had a central role in designing the time and place of the public Saharana in Israel, and thus controlled the content, in which they saw an opportunity to display their rich traditional legacy. They incorporated traditional elements with Israeli elements in the celebrations – films about the Jews of Kurdistan, a musical based on the local color of the Kurdish community in Israel, an exhibition of past and present achievements, and participation of other ethnic groups as well as politicians.

By means of the celebrations, the leaders wanted to establish their political power, to increase the electoral power of the labor party to which they belonged, and to promote the community's interests. This is particularly true about the 1970s and 1980s, during which many Kurdish Jews were prominent in the Labor party, and many of them supported it (Yonah, 2003). Many politicians, most identified with the Labor party, were invited, and on their part made speeches that praised the achievements of the Kurdish community and its contribution to Israel, and emphasized that the Saharana had become an integral part of Israeli existence. These declarations, even if they were intended to strengthen the speakers' political power, promoted the Kurdish leaders' agenda to make the Saharana a legitimate part of Israeli culture.

These and other rituals demonstrate the politicization of the Saharana celebrations in Israel, and mainly the loyalty trap that the Kurdish community and leaders were in, at least during the state's first two decades. They were in the political bosom of the Labor Party, but since they were a safe electoral power and demographically weak – they were dropped by the Labor Party and their cultural needs were neither recognized nor budgeted.

Political and economic considerations dictated an essential change in the timing of the Saharana celebration from Passover to Sukkot. Shimoni explained, "In Israel we didn't renew the celebration at the correct time, so as not to clash with another beautiful tradition of the North African community – the Mimouna, which is also celebrated in the spring, and we postponed the Saharana to Sukkot (in the autumn). This way, the people of Israel are enriched with additional traditional celebrations" (Shimoni, 1978b).

If so, Shimoni presented the change as a goodwill gesture to the Moroccan Jews, which culturally benefit all of Israel. However, evidence suggests that it was in fact a constraint forced by the balance of power between the minority group of Kurdish Jews and the more dominant group of Moroccan Jews (Bohadana & Tzezna, 12/10/1995; Brill, 10/10/1980). The change of the original time of the celebration indeed revealed the weakness of the Kurdish community and leaders, but produced an achievement for them – the survival of their traditional customs in a new historic and social context.

The Saharana, which in Kurdistan had a family and community nature, has the makings of a big, ethnic solidarity celebration in Israel. It is a day of family reunion for many, and the celebration sites are a meeting place for the community's young people. The familiar music and dancing, the cries of joy, the excited conversations and close physical contact – all reawaken the common and often hidden pride in their communal ethnic identity.

Conclusions

This paper discusses young leaders of minority groups of immigrants in Israel: Shaul Ben –Simhon from Morocco and Haviv Shimoni from Kurdistan. In the 1970s, they established immigrants' organizations, and organized widespread cultural activities, the main manifestation of which was the renewal

of the ethnic spring celebrations. These leaders were in fact 'identity entrepreneurs', who initiated and led a cultural revival of their group. They acted as central agents in structuring the new ceremonial pattern of the celebrations, and in the dynamics of continuous ethnic tradition despite the 'melting pot' policy.

Shaul Ben-Simhon started this process, by managing to make the Mimouna into a national celebration. I ascribe this achievement primarily to the increased demographic power of the Moroccan Jews in Israel and their leaders' political activism. The cultural revival of Moroccan Jews served as a role model of ethnic awakening by other minority groups, such as Kurdish Jews, who initiated their own celebration version while returning selectively to their ethnic roots.

The findings indicate that the action patterns of Ben-Simhon and Shimoni created a process of syncretism, i.e. the blending of various traditions. The syncretism in the celebrations served the leaders as a means to connect communities and generations. Thus they adjusted their ethnic celebration to the new social context, and made it part of collective Israeli identity.

The celebration programs emphasize the struggle of minority group leaders for their right to ethnic otherness, and their desire to integrate in the Israeli space as such. This message was delivered in their speeches too. Ben-Simhon and Shimoni appreciated the importance of the ethnic celebrations as a unifying factor, and repeatedly emphasized the symmetry of such unity – we indeed celebrate a particular ethnic celebration, but like other traditional customs of ours, it is part of the State of Israel. It does not divide the people, but unites them, and serves to bridge all the groups into one cultural Israeli ensemble.

These calls should not be read as an expression of cultural separatism, but as an attempt to expand the borders of Israeli culture, and include previously unknown repertoires. Thus, this is a demand for inclusion, which expresses the longing of Jews from Islamic countries for recognition and belonging as well as their sense of pride in their unique culture.

Despite the similarity in Ben-Simhon and Shimoni's actions, Shimoni and his partners did not aim to make the Saharana into a national celebration like the Mimouna, but made do with providing it with public legitimization. In my opinion, their soft voice reflects the relatively 'quiet' absorption of Kurdish Jews in Israel, devoid of a struggle with Israeli society (Shimoni, 1996). Their rather limited political and social activism compared to Moroccan Jews can be explained by their weak electoral power and great loyalty (at least during the first decades) to the ruling party.

The mobility and institutionalization processes of traditional practices such as the Saharana and the Mimouna in contemporary Israeli society, and the legitimization of these ethnic symbols in the public sphere, show that the public sphere itself has changed. The result of the politics of identity by the immigrant groups from Islamic countries, led by their leaders, indicates therefore that low culture can be absorbed, is not as weak as it may seem, and

can integrate into the hegemonic culture and even influence it (see: Alba & Nee, 2003).

This observation empowers the absorbed group, and sees the immigration process as constant negotiation that may produce results for ethnic minority groups. It is, nevertheless, obvious that it cannot be called a 'victory' of a marginal group, but an ongoing struggle for the structuring of power, identity and a voice (Castronovo, 1997).

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