

Review Article

On the Social and Cultural History of the Moriscos

Fadel Abdallah

University of Minnesota, 505 University Ave. S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55414 Phone: (612) 623-0629

Anwar G. Chejne. *Islam and the West: The Moriscos - A Cultural and Social History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983.

Following the reconquest of Granada in 1492, the Muslim minority in Spain, known derogatorily as Moriscos, were subjected to harsh measures in the form of edicts and restrictions. Forced to live in a hostile environment, which happened to be their homeland, they developed their own attitude, accompanied by passive resistance and sporadic revolt. This attitude was expressed in an extensive, clandestine and mostly anonymous literature known as the Aljamiado literature, which was for the most part written in the Romance in Arabic script. Although the Moriscos preserved a sentimental attachment to Arabic as their own language, they were no longer able to use it. This literature was, for the most part, inspired by Arabic models that not only expressed defiance towards the oppressor, but also reiterated Islamic values. Written mostly during the XV and XVI centuries, the Aljamiado literature is significant for the study of cultural change, offering valuable data for the historian, religious scholar, sociologist, anthropologist, philologist, belle - lettrist, and civil and human rights advocate, who would gain insight into the fate of a deprived and persecuted minority living in a hostile environment.

The work under review is intended according to its author "to survey and analyze the self-expression of the Moriscos as contained in their own literature; it also assesses the status of a minority struggling for survival, with reference to ideological conflict, the clash of religions and cultures, and differing mutual perceptions." Although the work is intended to be a general "cultural and social history," as the sub-title indicates, it is in many ways a study of the *mentalitae* of a group of people who were forced to live on the defensive in their bid for survival.

Though there is an abundant body of literature on the Moriscos, it is based largely on Christian sources. Thus, the merit of this study is that it looks at the Moriscos from within, drawing upon their experiences which were recorded and viewed in Aljamiado literature. Prof. Chejne's work not only gives us great insights on the mentality and attitudes of the Moriscos, but it also tells us a great deal about the mentality of the Spanish authorities who saw in the use of Arabic language, Arabic names and customs, public baths, dancing the 'zamba' and singing, circumcision, abstention from eating pork or drinking alcoholic beverages a threat to both the Church and the State, and thus tried to impose prohibitions against these observances, customs and values. (p. 10)

The Moriscos' reaction to this hostility and alienation imposed on them resulted in the revival of a strong historical consciousness about their past Islamic ascendancy and, by extension, about their place in history. This produced not only strong pride in past Islamic accomplishments and faithfulness to Islamic values and practices, but also an unshakable belief in and great hope for the Moriscos' ultimate deliverance. This consciousness of a glorious past and present tribulation strengthened belief in future redemption through the triumph of divine power over the deeds of man. Uncultured and relegated to the margin of society, aware of their shortcomings and difficulties, the Moriscos' hope for a brighter future did not falter. This unshaken confidence and its underlying expectations emerge from their literature on religious matters, polemics, history, legends, epics, novels, and poetry. (p. 18) Professor Chejne did an admirable job in illuminating the Moriscos' attitudes and mentality through his analysis of these different genres of Aljamiado literature. One of the major finds of the author is that "the Moriscos' writings are for the most part didactic and often deal with the theme of hopelessness and despair which end in triumph and bliss within a divine plan." (p. 18)

Though the Moriscos drew heavily from Arab-Islamic models and themes, these were not, however, the sophisticated and highly intellectual productions of the golden times of Arabo-Islamic culture. Prof. Chejne makes it clear that Arabic culture had been declining in Muslim Spain at the time of the Reconquest, and intellectual leaders found new horizons in the Muslim countries of North Africa and the East, leaving their fellow Andalusians intellectually impoverished and increasingly more inclined towards popularized forms of culture both in style and content. In the absence of recognized religious and educational institutions for Arabic and Islamic culture, the task of educating fell on individual self-appointed scholars who, in spite of their intellectual limitations, commanded great respect among the Moriscos as their literature makes it clear. On the other hand, being the leaders and teachers of their communities, striving to preserve and disseminate Islamic values and mores, they were seen as dangerous and were closely watched by the Inquisition.

The exit of talent, lack of contact with the outside world, the limitations of the Moriscos themselves, and persistent Christian attempts to eliminate cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions were all devastating factors against the preservation of the essentials of Morisco culture. Due to this, the author sees a tendency towards selectivity rather than systematic study of a total discipline in the Moriscos' literature. (pp. 32-33)

The harsh measures against the Moriscos are seen by our author as the result of the authorities' ignorance of "the sensitivity of a proud people steeped in a deeply ingrained tradition and [reflecting] their bitter experience of broken promises and betrayal." (p. 29) Under these circumstances, the Moriscos placed their fate in the hands of God and the stars, developing certain messianic ideas about the future and attributing their desperate plight to divine punishment for past sins. This moralistic interpretation of history, however, was accompanied by a strong belief in a future deliverance which is based on a number of prophecies that foretell not only their desperate plight, but the ultimate triumph of Islam over Christianity. The Christians had parallel prophecies which foretell the fall of the Ottoman and the ultimate expulsion of the Moriscos. (pp. 27-28) Such prophecies and counter-prophecies contributed to continued strife and served both as psychological wars and as psychological consolation.

The use of a foreign, vulgar language was regarded as demeaning if not a betrayal of Arabic linguistic tradition, but was justified as a necessary expedient in the face of rampant illiteracy in Arabic. Prof. Chejne dwells on the question of the reason for using Arabic script to write a romance language. He discusses the views which emphasized that this was due to the strength of a rigid custom, to the superstitious veneration of characters that looked holy by virtue of a divine revelation, the Qur'an, or to a clever artifice for concealing the secrets of conscience from a vigilant and powerful enemy. Our author argues that the reason for writing in Arabic script can be seen in the light of the fact that the Moriscos being deprived of a Latin education had no choice other than continuing to use Arabic script, acquiring in the process consciousness of its significance as a symbol in their struggle for identity under heavy strictures. As for a non-Arabic-speaking Morisco, the use of Arabic script may be viewed as a pragmatic means to learn the fundamentals of Islam in a "foreign language." (pp. 38-42)

Aljamiado literature mirrors the Moriscos' innermost thoughts and feelings and eloquently reaffirms their beliefs and observances, and at the same time represents a challenge to the numerous Christian edicts of restriction and persecution. As such the literature is a valuable document for understanding not only the plight of the Moriscos, but their psyche, indomitable endurance in the face of formidable odds, hopes, aspirations, and manner of resolving the conflict between retaining self-identity and escaping persecution. (p. 43)

The author proceeds to discuss and analyze some of the most outstanding characteristics of the Moriscos' literature. He observes the phenomenon of "anonymity" and in relation to this he states that "the majority of Aljamiado authors, translators, or paraphrasere chose anonymity by design to avoid the wrath of the secular and ecclesiastical authorities." (p. 38) The nostalgic characteristic of this literature is another point observed and documented by the author. (p. 39)

Theocentrism constitutes the major element in Moriscos' perspective and permeates all their thinking. The Moriscos used this literature not only as an outlet and means of self-edification, but as an instrument of self-defense against the Christian threat to their beliefs, dignity, prosperity, and very being. Aljamiado literature was inclusive in that it could satisfy all the emotional, spiritual, and social needs of the Moriscos. It encompassed Islam as a whole way of life - customs, daily conduct, food, drink, marriage, burial and other practices - and was nourished and inspired by a strong historical consciousness of Islam as a religion, a system of governance, and a culture. This religious perspective permeates even their profane stories and secular literature. (p. 43-49) Unlike classical Arabic literature addressed to the erudite, Aljamiado literature was meant for the common man. Its simple language lacks ornamentation of style, complicated similes, and metaphors. Its artistic merit rests in its simplicity, directness, and an often lofty and intense feeling which has great dramatic effect. (pp. 47-49)

The simplification and selectivity of tradition can be seen in legislation, religious observances, God's attributes, the ultimate deliverance of the Moriscos, and the triumph of Islam over Christianity. They selected those traditions that best met their needs and added some of their traditions that do not appear in the established Six Canons. Moreover, the Moriscos' ceremonies, practices, and rituals related to birth, circumcision, marriage, death and burial, and dietary laws, all reflect the mental attitude of the Moriscos in their determination to preserve their religious and cultural traditions as well as their self-identity vis-a-vis their oppressors. (pp. 56-67) On another level, the abundant polemical literature offering broad refutation of Christianity and Judaism is an indication of the defensive situation that the Moriscos had to deal with. This gives our author the opportunity to survey and document the history of this polemical literature of the two parties involved in the struggle. (pp. 57-87)

Secular history is almost non-existent in the Moriscos' literature; their strong historical consciousness is derived from religious history. The historico-legendary writings of the Moriscos centered on the miraculous triumph of Islam, the personality of its founder Muhammad and a few pre-Islamic and Islamic figures. These historical writings are characterized by being simple narratives with great display of devotion, intertwining facts with legends and

marvellous accounts. In Moriscos' literature, Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, emerges as the personification of chivalry and heroism and an instrument in the fulfillment of God's will. He is seen as the ideal knight who uses his sword to defend the faith. (p. 97-106) Maintaining their faith in the face of their tribulation, suffering, and humiliation made the Moriscos seek psychological consolation in the stories of the pre-Islamic biblical characters for whom the Moriscos had great reverence. Joseph's story, for example, is celebrated in both prose and verse in moving language with the conclusion conveying the concept that good will ultimately triumph over evil. It is obvious that the Moriscos could identify with Joseph's shattered life and ultimate triumph. Hope could also be derived from Job's deliverance from his suffering after his unshakable belief in the Lord, and from Moses' deliverance of his suffering people from tyranny. Jesus and Solomon are other biblical figures who received the attention of the Moriscos. This literature was intended to serve as a "psychological therapy" to use current terms. (pp. 108-113)

Futuristic history or eschatology was part of the Moriscos' historical perspective. Thus, writings about the Day of Judgement and the Hereafter form part of their literature. After surveying their historico-legendary literature, a vision of history emerges, a vision pregnant with religious significance, guided by a belief in a divine plan in which God makes Islam the ultimate manifestation of His will and the consummation of His Revelation. Prof. Chejne argues that "one can hardly speak of a Moriscos historiography; rather, the Moriscos possessed a historical perspective, based on and inspired by careful selection of materials from Arabic sources in the form of translations or paraphrasing. . . . The Moriscos made calculated selections to meet their social and religious needs. . . . These historical writings had the purpose of indoctrinating, they were written not by scholars for scholars, but by pedagogues who had a full appreciation of the spiritual and psychological needs and problems facing their fellow Moriscos." (pp. 109-112)

The author explains how the Christian edicts and restrictions led to the Moriscos' becoming increasingly undernourished educationally until they lacked even an elementary education. Deprived of formal training and forbidden to possess Arabic books, they had to rely more and more on oral tradition, direct experience, and superstitions derived from their Latin environment as well as from the classical and popular Arabic cultural legacy. The extant Moriscos literature indicates that sorcery and talismans fall between the realms of religious and natural sciences. The presence of a relatively abundant literature on divination - alongside the Moriscos' strong attachment to Islamic dogma and values - further indicates their lack of speculative theology and of intellectual and scientific knowledge that would have facilitated the production of philosophical or scientific works. (pp. 115-117) The Moriscos had their relapses in a seeming over-reliance on magic, talisman, and astrology - sub-

jects that were marginal to both religion and science and often controversial among Christian and Muslim scholars. But it is doubtful that the Moriscos, who lacked sophistication, ever realized the religious implications of such practices. (p. 170)

In conclusion, because the Moriscos was driven to despair and made to feel a stranger in his homeland, living on the margin of a society that despised him, there was little he could do except fantasize and hope for better days. The Moriscos' expectations of a deliverer is clearly manifested in the heroes of their epic narratives which the author surveys. Aljamiado literature was not written so much for entertainment as to convey a message of hope in times of despair. (pp. 133-170)

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