

Selected Readings on “La Nação,” the “Portuguese Nation”

Bodian, Miriam. *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

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The community [in Amsterdam], having established its basic conformity with longstanding patterns of Jewish communal life, gave expression to its “Portuguese” distinctiveness. Until 1615 there was nothing in the institutional life of the community that could not be found in other Sephardi (and with some modifications, Ashkenazi) communities. The orthodoxy of its educational, welfare, and religious institutions were reflected in familiar Hebrew names given them – *Talmud Torah*, *Neve Salom* (i.e. Shalom), *Bikur Holim*. But in 1615, communal leaders made a striking departure, establishing a prestigious institution which reflected in the most startling way the complex ideas of community and identity among the “Men of the Nation”: a society for dowering poor brides, the *Santa Comanhia de dotar orphas e donzelas pobres*, known as the *Dotar*. This was the first communal institution in Amsterdam to bear a non-Hebrew name...

The truly novel aspect of this society... was the communications network it created with the crypto-Jewish communities of France and Antwerp. The scope of its operations was not limited by political, religious, or geographical boundaries. Girls living anywhere in the “Portuguese” diaspora outside Spain might apply for a dowry, whether they were practicing Jews or not, and membership was open in a similar way. Thus, although the *Dotar* was a body within a rabbinically orthodox community, it gave institutional expression to its members’ affiliation to that most unorthodox entity, “the Nation.”

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The emigres who settled in Amsterdam were virtually the only Jews in the region when they arrived... they were thus not absorbed into a pre-existing Jewish communal structure as were ex-conversos who settled in the Mediterranean region. Their collective life remained overwhelmingly “Portuguese,” and they did not experience a strong break with the New Christian diaspora.

When the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam were eventually joined by Ashkenazi Jews from Germany and Poland, they had already established their own “Portuguese” cultural style, which they proceeded to protect jealously. The ethos they had cultivated, emphasizing their particular experience of suffering and heroism in the Peninsula and their Iberian social superiority, allowed them to feel secure vis-à-vis Jews whose rabbinic roots were deeper and more natural than their own... They chose to stay aloof from the Ashkenazim, and their favorable legal status in Amsterdam gave them the freedom to do so. They did not need to unite with other

Jews for self-protection and were not forced to live with other Jews in a ghetto, as in Venice. They thus felt free to construct their collective experience on their own terms, emphasizing their attachment to the “Portuguese” diaspora while distancing themselves from the Ashkenazim.

Finally, the relative geographical isolation of Amsterdam from other major Jewish populations (Poland-Lituania, Moravia, Bohemia, Italy, the Balkans) had the effect of fostering closer ties between the “Portuguese” in Amsterdam and the population of New Christians in northwestern Europe. Even after Ashkenazim began to settle in large numbers, the combined crypto-Jewish and “rejudaized” converso population constituted the richest and most vital Jewish cultural presence in northwestern Europe. The Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam quickly became a center for this far-flung “Nation “ defined only by psychological and ethnic boundaries.

These circumstances – the emigres’ experience of being pioneers of Jewish settlement (or resettlement), their ability to segregate themselves from local Ashkenazim, and their physical distance from other major Jewish populations – reinforced their continued identification with “the Nation.” Their attachments to relatives and commercial correspondents in the Peninsula or in the New World were richer, more concrete, and more natural than their attachment to “the Jewish people.” The term “the Nation” evoked an entire world of vivid memories and feelings; in contrast, “the Jewish people” remained a somewhat vague cerebral theological concept – one that had its place primarily in the synagogue and in theological discussion. The communal elite thus instinctively sought to affirm and concretize the community’s affiliation to the “Portuguese” diaspora...