"We want integration but such that shows our part": Ethnic activism among immigrants' political-social leadership

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the bi-polar identity of young leaders of immigrant groups from Morocco and Kurdistan in Israel, who led the struggle for legitimization of their culture and redefinition of the Israeli cultural space. They were, in fact, 'cultural entrepreneurs', who initiated and headed a cultural revival, and acted as pivotal change agents in the dynamics of continuing their ethnic tradition, while selectively returning to their ethnic origins. The syncretism that they adopted in the renewal of their ethnic celebrations facilitated an inter-generational, diachronic dialog as well as dialog with the 'other' outside their ethnic group.

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

INTRODUCTION
The concept of identity in postmodern thought is typically represented within the wider context of culture, which actually determines the type of identity that is created and represented, and defines the norms and social and personal codes of the individual's identity. Although some argue that the psychological mobility that dictates the identity process is universal, the conditions under which cultural boundaries are blurred (such as immigration) heavily and extensively affect the identities that move between different life-pattern spaces [77].

Immigration is perceived as a crisis event, which stems from changes in one's central areas of life [17, 64]. Since immigrants experience many losses of resources during immigration, they undergo a process of grief processing that includes lack of control, psychological distress, and questions regarding identity and belonging [65].

Under immigration conditions, the process of structuring ethnic identity is dynamic, and changes subject to the period and destination of immigration. The immigrant's ethnic identity, assuming that he has not assimilated completely in the majority society, is structured by the host society through daily integration, and is ascribed to a specific social group in the proximal host, simultaneously with the changes that occur in his attitude to himself as an immigrant [41, 56]. Ben-Rafael and Ben-Haim [11] argued that the importance of identification with an ethnic group at the expense of maintaining the unique features of one's personal identity has increased. In this context, 'identification' means demonstrating one's belonging to a specific ethnic group. Part of the identification process also includes accepting the values and norms of the group one identifies with, as guidelines for the identifying individual's personality and behavior [57].

From a macro point of view, an ethnic group is defined as a group with historic and geographic borders, cultural content, characteristics that compose the group and its power balance, which place the various groups in hierarchical order in the host society [48]. On the micro level, an ethnic group is defined by aspects of the dynamics of ethnic identity and identification, and by how the individual immigrant makes decisions about the importance of ethnicity to himself. On this level, the ethnic options that people choose as part of their identity are examined, as is the degree by which they include their ethnic identity in everyday life [41].

Immigration is, therefore, 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 [42, 85].

Berry [14, 15, 16] 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 that ideology and policy of the dominant group are an important component of immigrants' integration and the relationships between ethnic groups.

Mirski [47] 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.

The discussion in the literature clearly indicates that dealing with immigrants' ethnic identity and ethnic borders means referring to social structuring, which is the result of immigrant groups' negotiations among themselves and vis-à-vis the rest of society [33, 41].

The goal and contribution of this study

This paper examines two young leaders of minority groups of immigrants in Israel: Shaul Ben-Simhon and Haviv Shimoni. In the 1970s, each of them established an immigrant organization that initiated extensive cultural activities: Ben-Simhon from Morocco and Shimoni from Kurdistan. One outstanding feature was the renewal of the ethnic spring festivities of Moroccan immigrants (the *Mimouna*) and Kurdish immigrants (the *Saharana*), which are the focal point of this paper. These celebrations are a central expression of the ethnic revival of immigrant groups in Israel. Ben-Simhon and Shimoni experienced their ethnic culture and the culture of the host country, and they acted to promote their respective communities and values within the host society. It would thus seem that they created a model of leadership with bi-polar identification that served as a bridge between the cultures.

The issue of leadership and how it is formed has been widely discussed in the literature [10], as well as its degree of influence on the public it leads [8]. The leadership phenomenon crystalizes through three key elements – the leader, the environmental context and those led [35]. Various scholars (i.e., Popper [52]) have underlined leaders' characteristics and features such as personal charisma, the ability to outline a vision and hope, having values, and more, but at present increasingly more studies point to the led group and the context as more important. Further studies have highlighted a group's need of a leader especially in times of crisis [54, 55].

The cultural context has been noted to have great importance in forming a leader [22, 32]. Without understanding the cultural context and the led group's way of thinking, it would be difficult to understand the leadership and it effect [31, 50]. During periods of uncertainty and decreased influence of formal leadership (on the level of family and wider social frameworks), leadership has especially meaningful significance [53].

I think that those who achieve leadership status are those that are able to combine various identities (see also: Sharaby [66]); namely create – in their identity and behavior patterns – a process of syncretism, which means combining religious and cultural elements and creating a new tradition [78]. Syncretism indicates a process of change in personal and group identity and the configurations of this process. It develops consciously, but also unintentionally [40]. The process occurs mainly among minority groups, and creates variations of tradition and modernity [69]. Syncretism is often a minority's strategy to survive or to penetrate the center [78].

Adopting the syncretism approach, I support the criticism of the classic assimilation model, and conclude that various ethnic identities may serve as a resource for immigrants, and they can exist alongside cultural integration [4]. Such a critical perception also emphasizes the multiplicity of immigrants' social places and adjustment tracks [93].

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.

The syncretism model that empirically underlies this study could shed light on simultaneous processes – of adopting the values of a host society and preserving ethnic elements – among young leaders of immigrant communities, a topic that has not been sufficiently addressed in research [68]. Faced with the contemporary waves of massive immigration worldwide, this issue is of utmost importance. These leaders have a crucial effect on the integration of immigrants and the host countries' efforts to absorb them. This study could contribute to the effort to understand the protest patterns of young leaders, and to consider inclusion mechanisms of ethnic-minority cultures in multicultural societies, by means of dialog with their young leaders.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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 [83]. Immigrants from Morocco – which this paper addresses – were the largest group (58.5%) among North African immigrants [44].

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 [58]. 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 [21]. The immigrants were directed to towns in Israel's geographic periphery, thus perpetuating ethnic inequality [82].

The central object of the stereotypical attitude was immigrants from Morocco, who were considered 'bad material', and their immigration was regulated by selection [37]. 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 [76]. 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 [83].

In the 1980s, there were about 100,000 Kurdish-Jewish immigrants living in Israel [80]. They had contributed extensively to the national enterprise of rebuilding the country [90], 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 [79].

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 [21].

The segregation and marginality fed the immigrants' ethnic identity consciousness, and laid the foundation for it becoming a political resource. This politics of identity was 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 [29]. 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 [24]. 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 [24].

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 [59], and on the other hand gave rise to a separate culture in various areas such as music, religious practices, celebrations, ceremonies, etc. [88].

Thus, local cultures developed, expressed by the preservation of traditional patterns of the countries of origin, which Regev [59] 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) [60].

This dynamics of identities in Israeli society was initiated and led by the young leaders of excluded immigrant groups. The most prominent ones were Shaul Ben-Simhon and Haviv Shimoni, who can be described as 'identity entrepreneurs' [23], because they not only protested against the ethnic discrimination of their respective communities, but actively

introduced their particular cultural symbols into mainstream Israeli society and participated in their design.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

This study is based on the qualitative method of content analysis; namely, of newspaper articles published in the Israeli press from 1967 to 2017. It should be noted that during the first decades of Israel, media coverage of immigrant communities from Islamic countries and their cultural customs was sparse, and can serve as an allegory of their marginal social and cultural status. However, since the early 1970s, during which their ethnic revival began, the press provided much more coverage.

The ethnic spring celebrations of Moroccan immigrants (Mimouna) and Kurdish immigrants (Saharana), which were accompanied by publications by the organizers, attracted media attention, and were amply covered. Media coverage has increased since the 1970s, and the reportage was usually sympathetic, probably due to the critical role against the establishment that the media had started to play during that period. Review of the newspaper articles provides essential information about Ben-Simhon and Shimoni's central role in turning their ethnic celebrations from family or community events into Israeli events.

Comparison between newspaper coverage of the Mimouna and the Saharana is inevitable. Whereas the Mimouna became an event that was highly mentioned in the media, and the press played an important part in making it a national event, reports on the Saharana were limited. This quite clearly reflects its status as a sectorial ethnic celebration. Also, I presume, the interest of the press is a consequence of the size of the ethnic group and its political-electoral power.

Another important source of information was the journal of the National Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel – '*Hithadshut*' (Renewal), headed my Haviv Shimoni during the years 1973-2000, which reported the organization's decisions and actions, historic articles about the life of Jewish communities in Kurdistan and their immigration to Israel, biographies of famous people from the community, and so on. A lot of space was devoted to describing the Saharana celebration in Kurdistan and especially in Israel, public figures who participated, and full texts of the speeches that they and heads of the organization made. For a member of the Kurdish community, '*Hithadshut*' had a dual role: a source of information on their culture, and an active role in strengthening their ethnic identity and sense of pride, precisely because of the negative image they had in Israel.

From 2010 onwards, the National Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel, headed by Yehuda Ben-Yosef, published an additional journal – '*Ana Kurdi*', which was also an important source for me to learn about the organization's many activities to preserve their unique culture, including the Saharana celebrations in Israel.

I also made use of invitations, pamphlets, tapes and photos from the 1970s to date, which were found in the offices of the Moroccan and Kurdish immigrant organizations and on their websites, and videos that the immigrants' descendants uploaded to the internet in recent years.

The research was also based on participative observations that I conducted in the last decade during Mimouna and Saharana celebrations. These observations have a significant experiential value for me as a scholar: the celebration programs, the food, costumes, dances, family reunions, speeches by Ben-Simhon, Shimoni and heads of state, and so on. During the

celebrations I spoke with older and younger celebrants, men and women, about their experiences of the celebrations and what they meant to them. The stories were analysed according to the model suggested by Lieblich and colleagues [43], which is based on the phenomenological approach that aims to understand social life through the eyes of people who had experienced it. Thus, we can use it to examine the cultural content that guided the interviewees, and the historic and social context that affected the forming of their identity [49]. The findings are presented as follows: I start with describing and analysing the ethnic activity of Shaul Ben-Simhon as an identity entrepreneur among the Moroccan-Jewish community in Israel, and then I discuss Haviv Shimoni as an identity entrepreneur among the Kurdish-Jewish community in Israel.

Politically we wanted the right to be different
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 at 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. Ben-Simhon passed away in 2017 [2].

In 1966, Ben-Simhon founded the 'Association of the Fez Community Immigrants'. Together with his fellow members, he 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 [46]. 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 [30, 67].

In an interview, Ben-Simhon emphasized that he had organized the first public Mimouna in Israel with his friends but with no establishment intervention [7]. 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. Moroccan 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 [12].

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: [6]). 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" [5].

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: [26, 34]. 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 Israeli culture, and thus legitimized its inclusion in the national mainstream (see: [28, 89]).

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" [7]. 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 [12].

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 [27, 86]. 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.

There is no continuity without roots
To give the Mimouna an added-value expression, the organizers expanded the traditional elements of the celebrations, and displayed the culture and achievements of Moroccan Jews in exhibitions at the celebration sites. However, the traditions that were transposed to a different time and conditions underwent a change, and received a new interpretation in Israel. This syncretic ceremonial tradition, which was designed by the leaders of the Moroccan immigrant community in Israel (led by Ben-Simhon), and which continues to this day, has in fact become an integral part of the tradition itself and of the present.

Observations of families and newspaper articles indicate a distancing from religious elements that were originally part of the Mimouna celebrations; for instance, the festive prayers in the synagogue and the rabbi's blessing have disappeared, probably because with the immigration to Israel, adherence to tradition declined, the family structure changed, and the older generation lost its authority. Guests participating in the celebrations include family members, acquaintances, neighbours, friends and politicians. A large portion of the celebrants are not of North African origin. The hosts receive them dressed in traditional clothing that was brought when they immigrated or purchased on 'roots' journeys to North Africa. Authentic Moroccan music and Israeli songs are played in the background (see, for example: [9, 25, 36, 61, 81]).

Interviewees born in Morocco and generations 1.5 and 2 emphasized the importance of transferring the Mimouna tradition to the next generation, as explained by Yossi: "About 300 guests will come to the family home this evening for the Mimouna. The goal is to transfer our

roots to the children and preserve the tradition". When asked whether the children continued the tradition, Suzi and Shimon replied, "Our children were raised on the tradition. They come every year. It's part of the tradition to visit the parents on Mimouna eve".

Ayala told us, "The parents tried to preserve the tradition as much as possible, and it's very important to us to pass it on to our children. We see that they find the Mimouna very important, and it's an inseparable part of who they are. For example, this year our soldier son did extra duty rosters to get leave on the Mimouna, because it's important to him to be at home on this day". Zahava and Eli mentioned, "The children love the holiday. They always invite their non-Moroccan friends. Our married children come to us every year because they are used to it, and all their childhood friends keep coming regularly".

On Mimouna eve, many North African families serve store-bought and home-prepared traditional food, as well as Israeli food: burrekas, croissants and sweets. Customs that were mostly discarded are placing a pitcher of milk on the table as a symbol of prosperity, or a fish as a symbol of fertility. Shula explained, "Today we don't put it on the table, for no reason – we just stopped, like it doesn't really mean much to anyone. Today we have a new generation that doesn't understand all the significance of the Mimouna as we know it". Mazal told us that since she didn't have gold coins to insert in a bowl of flour, as her mother used to do, she uses chocolate coins, which she also scatters along the table. This improvisation demonstrates the wide interpretation given today to Mimouna celebration traditions, according to the new circumstances.

The celebrants that I observed discussed politics, food recipes and other things, but the issue of matchmaking, which had been central in family gatherings in North Africa, did not come up. My main impression of this ceremony was this: Israeli hospitality with ethnic refreshments. Celebrants who immigrated from Morocco in their teens emphasized, on one hand, the importance of the celebration to continuing traditions, unity and family reunions, and the fact that they happily accepted it becoming common property. But, on the other hand, they expressed sadness over customs that had disappeared, the celebration being appropriated by politicians, and the changes to its religious nature.

David, who was 8 years old when he immigrated to Israel, said, "I really like to celebrate at home, and there is a good atmosphere, but it was more exciting in Morocco. I was a young boy; I remember the dough, the preparations … my sweetest memory is of my late father reading out loud from the bible. But today the celebration has become more Israeli. They made something of the holiday that doesn't really exalt it, for instance all the politicians that come around".

On Mimouna day itself, in Israel, the celebrants' main activity is barbequing meat in parks, although traditional foods are also present, brought from home in coolers. The music at these celebrations is eclectic: original Moroccan songs, performed by Moroccan bands that integrated into mainstream Israeli music, as well as trance songs, Israeli and Mediterranean music, performed by famous singers and groups. The organizers stated that this music is more familiar to the young people, and makes them happy.

In my opinion, the Israeli character of the Mimouna stems from the participation of many Israelis that are not of North African descent, and from ethnic intermarriages in Israel. Liat, whose parents had emigrated from Iraq, told us, "I didn't know what the Mimouna was until I got married. At first, I joined him as his wife, and then I simply fell in love with this holiday. Today I celebrate the Mimouna according to tradition. I make *mufletas*, and feel it's my holiday

just like anyone else's". Avi explained, "Today there is a new generation, and many married non-Moroccans, so it had an impact, because not everyone kept the holiday. There is different music, they put different drinks on the table, and they no longer wear traditional clothes, because it's not appropriate".

The Mimouna's syncretic process developed also because the second and third generation of North African immigrants choose to celebrate the holiday selectively. Shimon, who parents came from Morocco, told us, "This generation is free of opposition to their family and ethnic customs, and today celebrate without hesitation, from a relaxed place. Naturally, the result is a synthesis between the typical Israeliness of this generation and the old traditions of their parents". Yossi, a soccer coach, told us that the Mimouna celebrations at his home include pizza, burrekas and Israeli music, but also traditional elements: sweets, *mufletas* (thin, fried dough, dipped in honey and butter), and dances in traditional costumes. In his words, "We are not yet free of how we used to celebrate the holiday in our parents' home. Today it is a national holiday that symbolizes happiness".

Many of the second and third generation of North African immigrants choose to celebrate in parties, and hire a catering service to prepare the food most identified with the Mimouna – the *mufleta*. Advocate Ami Savir told us that he ordered 500 *mufletas* for the celebration at his home, where the guests danced to Israeli music played by a DJ. Savir explained that it is difficult to maintain the holiday's authenticity among his generation, but added, "We are the second and third generation of Moroccan Jews; we returned to our true roots. The previous generation tried to somewhat cover up traditions, and there were constraints too, but our attitude is different: There is no continuity without roots".

It can also be seen in the interviews that another expression of the integration of the Mimouna in Israeli culture is its seeping into the club culture. These places sell *mufletas* and other traditional sweets, the staff is dressed in traditional costumes, and the audio system blasts out Moroccan songs. Producers of such events tell about modern Mimouna parties held at other places, with Moroccan décor, *mufletas*, belly-dancers, and a DJ that plays contemporary Moroccan music in house rhythms. One club owner said, "It is a holiday that has become an Israeli celebration long ago". One producer said that the fact that so many Israelis celebrate the Mimouna, including young people at clubs, does not necessarily mean that they are part of the real Mimouna experience. The party-goers have no special sense of identification with the Mimouna; for them it is just another reason to party.

We want Israeli culture to be influenced by our culture
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 [87, 91]. 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 [62].

At the first convention of the organization, Shimoni demanded that the government take 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" [71].

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" [72].

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 [91], 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 to 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" [45].*

This statement indicates a leader's realistic viewpoint, caring about the future of his ethnic group, versus stronger cultural and demographic forces. Shimoni emphasized two trends in his declarations, which to him and the other leaders were not contradictory, and both undermined 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.

Since its establishment, the organization of Kurdish Jews has set as its goal to initiate, develop and promote cultural activities, so as 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 [19, 38, 39, 51].

Haviv Shimoni and his colleagues in the leadership of the Organization of Kurdish Jews 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 [91]. Many politicians, most of them 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 benefits 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 [18, 19]. 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.

In his speeches, Haviv Shimoni emphasized the need to renew the Saharana, as he said in 1990:
> *It needs changes and renovations. The Saharana, which is a real celebration, should not become something that is routine. The Saharana is renewed by moving from location to location, and by changes to the form and content, although they have not quite registered yet. But we must sit and deliberate, how to create new patterns which*

we imbue with new content, so that every year there is something fresh and new in the Saharana, and that will be its uniqueness [75] (see also [74]).

Circles of people close to one another

Participant observations and other sources from the recent decade indicate that additional new traditions have found their way into the Saharana celebrations, and have become part of the original traditions, such as an exhibition, films, and linking the celebrations to national events in an attempt to demonstrate the community's achievements and contribution to society. The Saharana in its Israeli version includes non-Kurdish celebrants and artists, and public figures driven by political motives, but whose declarations provide it with legitimization [13, 51, 92]. This syncretic ceremonial tradition designed by the leaders of the organization, headed by Shimoni, continues to this day, and has become an integral part of the tradition itself and of the present.

The celebration sites serve, also today, as a meeting place for the young men and women of the community. But, since young people in Israel have more independence choosing their mates, the traditional matchmaking and engagement customs that were practiced in Kurdistan have disappeared. Most celebrants do not wear ethnic costumes, although some people preserve tradition, and show up in ethnic clothes. As for food, innovation alongside tradition is evident; i.e., barbequing meat on coals or portable gas grills alongside huge pots of traditional food, which was prepared in advance and is offered to the guests. Additionally, alongside booths selling tapes, disks and books, one can find booths selling food (see also: [3, 63]).

It is my impression from the observations and interviews that the Saharana is assuming the features of an informal, giant picnic, at which the participants take advantage of the opportunity of entertainment and recreation, because happiness and a social gathering were and are the core ingredients of the celebrations in Kurdistan and in Israel. Older and younger celebrants declared that they would never miss this celebration. They said that since the community dispersed all over the country, the Saharan is an opportunity for family reunions for many of the participants, who meet relatives that live far away. One the participants told us, "For the nuclear and extended families of both my parents, these celebrations are a social gathering, a joint meal, and a sense of belonging to the community through Kurdish songs and dances".

Dancing is an integral part of the celebrations, accompanied by traditional musical instruments: the *dula* (drum) and *zorna* (trumpet), which are the known symbols of the Saharana. There is a desire to recreate the Kurdish dances in Israel, but today they are more rhythmic than in Kurdistan. Circles and circles of people, many of them young people that know the dances and the music, dance at the celebrations on the lawns surrounding the stage.
On the stage itself, there are performances of Kurdish dance troupes, some of which include youths who want to continue the tradition, and of Kurdish singers singing traditional songs. But, sometimes, famous singers, who are paid for their performance, perform on stage, which makes the Saharana a more commercial celebration. The boundary between the performers and the audience is indistinct, and often non-existent, as described by Simha: "At the Saharana there is great closeness between people. It doesn't feel like watching a show at a distance. Sometimes people get up on the stage and join the singing and dancing".

Thus, the syncretic nature of the Saharana plays a key role in strengthening modern ethnic identity among Kurdish Jews in Israel. The stereotyping that they have experienced contributed to this process. The familiar music, the well-known dances, the calls of joy that accompany the famous ethnic musical instruments: the *dula* and *zorna*, the excited

conversations and close physical contact – all recreate a shared, hidden identity among the celebrants. Ronen, a dancer in a Kurdish group, said, "I want to get to know my grandfather and be like him; and this is the beginning of the renewal of the celebrations that my grandfather had". Galit, also a dancer, told us:

> Personally, I can say that as a child I grew up on the music, singing and authentic Kurdish lifestyle. My father managed a Kurdish dance group, and my mother danced in it. Today I am a member of the official dance troupe of the national organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel, and one of its lead dancers. My brother manages it, and is one of the few professional zorna players in Israel today. I see that there is a strong desire to preserve our uniqueness. Our group, as well as other groups that performed at the last Saharana, danced in authentic costumes to the music of dula and the zorna, and danced the special dances.

Celebration participants, who had been born in Kurdistan, could not avoid comparing the celebrations here and there. Some expressed pride that traditions were being preserved. Miriam, for example, said:

> It seems that young people feel connected to the tradition and enjoy the celebration, and they will teach the next generation. The community preserves the Saharana. The young generation sends their kids to learn the dances at a young age. Everyone comes to the celebrations; we dance in large circles, and include all the dancers that come from all over the country. Every year that we hold the celebration, actually preserves the tradition, and reminds us of what was.

David said:

> Today we revive the customs we had in Kurdistan, the songs, the dances, the costumes, and the musical instruments. Many of the young people are proud and happy to dance. The return to Kurdistan is through dance. There are many young Kurdish singers, who were born in Israel, and Kurdish music. The community as a whole has integrated well in Israel, and has been acknowledged, so the young generation is prepared to return to our roots, to be part of it, and to say 'I belong' and not be embarrassed about it. On the contrary, they are proud to do exactly what their parents once did.

Hence, syncretism between various cultural traditions was created in the Saharana patterns in Israel, rooted in moving the celebration to a new social reality. The Israeli pattern of the celebrations also stemmed from the expansion of the participants to include family members, guests that are not of Kurdish origin, performers from other ethnic communities, as well as politicians. Furthermore, the authenticity of the celebration cannot be maintained if many of the second and third generation choose to observe the customs only selectively. In addition, I found that the Saharana organizers are largely responsible for the celebrations in their Israeli version. They want to include a large and varied public in the Saharana events, and to redesign their content, so that the Saharan receives national legitimacy.

CONCLUSIONS

Immigration is perceived as a crisis situation, because immigrants experience the loss of many resources when they immigrate. They undergo a process of grief processing, which involves lack of control, psychological distress, and questions of identity and belonging [65]. Studies have emphasized that a group's need for leadership is especially significant in times of crisis, uncertainty, and decline of formal authority on the family and community levels, such as in immigration situations [55]. It has also been stated that it is impossible to understand the leadership and its effect without understanding the cultural context [31].

This paper examines the identity and influence of prominent 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. They both acted as change and continuity agents by forming the renewed ceremonial tradition of the celebrations and their dynamics in Israel. 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 having an internal, inter-generational, diachronic dialog as well as a dialog with the 'other', outside the ethnic group. 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 highlighted 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 [70]. 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 [1].

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 [20].

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