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# **Discovering *La muerte ocultada*: Exploration on the Evolution of the *Romance* in the Sephardic Diaspora**

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## **Abstract**

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Spanish Jews were forced to abandon the country or to convert to the official Catholic faith. As a matter of fact, a multitude of Spanish Jews had already left Spain many decades before because of the socio-political intolerance. The Diaspora was very difficult; a large number of them died and suffered from great agony. The expelled Spanish Jews, also known as Sephardim, preserved the Spanish culture for many centuries; nevertheless, since the beginning of last century, this invaluable living legacy has been coming to an end. It is expected that as long as the Sephardic studies continues, the lessons learnt from the rich Sephardic cultural tradition will remain unforgettable.

The purpose of this article is to analyze a well-known ballad (*romance*) of the Sephardic oral tradition in North Africa: *La muerte ocultada* (*The Concealed Death*), standing out from many other similar but different Spanish versions. Given the Diaspora theme, the exploration on the Morocco's archaic versions has been concentrated on, because Morocco is the Sephardic area, where we have found more versions of the *romance* in question, and probably many of them had existed earlier than the time when the Jews were expelled from Spain.

**Keywords:** *La muerte ocultada*, romance, Judeo-Spanish ballads, Sephardic oral tradition, Moroccan Sephardim

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# Discovering *La muerte ocultada*: Exploration on the Evolution of the *Romance* in the Sephardic Diaspora

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At the end of the fifteenth century, the Spanish Jews were forced to abandon the country or to convert to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In fact, many of them started to emigrate long time before, on account of the socio-political intolerance to their religious group (Benbassa & Rodrigue, 2004, p. 23). The expelled Spanish Jews, also known as Sephardim, of which the invaluable legacy has gradually faded out over the past centuries, have been the protagonists of incredible vicissitudes along with a tenacious struggle for survival.

A substantial amount of research has examined the political, religious and social dimensions of the period in an attempt to clarify the reasons behind the Spanish Jews' expulsion. Despite the fact that the expulsion cannot be attributed to a strictly deterministic causality, several factors are indicated to have played an essential role (Benbassa & Rodrigue, 2004, pp. 48-49); however, for most people nowadays, it is still difficult to understand or admit why the Sephardic Jews were expelled (Díaz-Plaja, 1972, pp. 101-103). As a matter of fact, many Jews were forced to leave Spain, while others decided to stay in the country and converted themselves to Catholicism. The ones who remained would live many generations under the eyes of the Inquisition, a judicial institution that would be in charge of prosecuting and punishing all the New Catholics that had not really abandoned their previous faith (Díaz-Plaja, 1972, pp. 102-105). Meanwhile, many of the Sephardic Jews who went abroad would also suffer wide-ranging socio-economic difficulties. North Africa, Eastern Mediterranean and other countries in Western Europe, such as France, the Netherlands, Italy, and the United King-

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<sup>1</sup> According to Benbassa and Rodrigue (2004, p. 47), although it is difficult to reach an agreement among the scholars, it seems reasonable to estimate that about one hundred and fifty thousand people left Spain in 1492.

dom, would be the destinations of many Sephardic immigrants at the end of fifteenth century.

Emigration was not easy; for example, half of the Sephardim that travelled to North Africa died because of plunder, illness and natural disasters. Moreover, the poor pre-existent Jewish communities of Morocco did not extend a sincere welcome to the newcomers (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 73). In spite of all, the expelled Spanish Jews who went to North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean could preserve their traditions and a peculiar Spanish language, which has maintained for centuries some old and charming elements of the medieval Spanish that has already disappeared in modern speakers. On the other hand, those who went to the other West European countries mentioned above were so integrated into the local societies that they had lost their Spanish by the XVIII century (Díaz-Mas, 2004, p. 276).

Among Spanish people, the Sephardic world is full of topics of fascination, of mystery, and even of a sense of guilt for the way they have been treated; but in most cases, there is a lack of knowledge and detailed information. Nevertheless, the Sephardic legacy is undoubtedly associated with Spanish culture and history. The preservation and investigations of this tradition is essential to revive the Sephardic culture and tradition. The voices of the Sephardic people are not only a lesson of history, philology and literature, but also valuable promotion of the art of living, which is so necessary in modern times. In this article, one well-known ballad (hereinafter referred to as *romance*)<sup>2</sup> of the Sephardic oral tradition in North Africa will be analyzed: *La muerte ocultada* (*The Concealed Death*), in the hope that it will cast a new light upon their cultural legacy.

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2 As P. Díaz-Mas has explained (2008, p. 115): “el romancero no es más que una manifestación hispánica de un tipo de poesía narrativa de origen medieval que existe o ha existido en prácticamente todas las culturas europeas, y que se conoce bajo el nombre genérico de balada, aunque recibe nombres distintos en cada cultura: *ballad* en el ámbito de la lengua inglesa, *volksballade* en alemán, *chanson* en el dominio francófono, *canzone* en Italia, *tragúdi* en Grecia, etc.” (All the English translation of Spanish quotations will be my own and provided throughout this paper: “The *romancero* is only a manifestation of a kind of narrative poetry of medieval origin, which exists or has existed in nearly all European cultures, under different names: *ballad* in the English culture, *volksballade* in German, *chanson* in France, *canzone* in Italy, *tragúdi* in Greece, etc.”) Herein the Spanish word *romance* will be referred to Spanish ballad; the word *romance* is considered more adequate than the term *ballad*, because the former allows the reader to identify its Spanish origin.

## 1 *Romance* in the Sephardic tradition

As the brilliant Hispanist Menéndez Pidal affirmed, wherever Spanish is spoken, there is *romance*, “Tengo por dogma que el romance existe donde quiera que se habla el español”<sup>3</sup> (Espinosa, 1915, p. 454); this is as such in the Judeo-Spanish spoken ambient. Nearly four centuries after their expulsion, the Spaniards rediscovered, during the Spanish campaign in Africa and after the taking of Tetuan in 1860, in the Jewish quarters of the city, the Sephardic communities which after many generations outside Spain still preserved the Spanish culture. With the surprise of finding the Sephardim, the Spanish troops discovered that the Sephardic Jews had an uncomfortable life, as Díaz-Mas (1986, p. 188) showed after studying the writings of the campaign chroniclers, “se plasma la impresión que los sefardíes marroquíes despertaron en los españoles; hay siempre una mezcla de curiosidad y prevención hacia aquellos individuos que vivían, en su mayoría, en la más absoluta miseria.”<sup>4</sup>

The Sephardic communities are poor; moreover, they live frightened of their neighbours: “Jewish communities, both in the Balkans and Morocco, were clearly as fearful of their Muslim neighbours in the late nineteenth century as they had been, according to Addison, in the late seventeenth century” (Pomeroy, 2005, p. 21). Nevertheless, the strength of their spoken language persisted for centuries, and alongside it so also did the long-standing *romances*. The songs of *romance* helped the Sephardim to cope with the misery and fears in life: “para llenar las horas de asueto, para hacer menos penosas las labores de la casa o el trabajo artesanal, para animar las reuniones, acompañar los juegos, celebrar las fiestas y, muy especialmente, acunar a los niños”<sup>5</sup> (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 156). In addition, their own religious ritual custom also contributes to the continuous recital of *romance*: “As the Jewish religion proscribes the playing of musical instruments on the Sabbath and on holy days,

3 “For me it is undoubted that wherever Spanish is spoken, the *romance* exists.” These are the words that Menéndez Pidal wrote to the folklorist Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa.

4 “which reflected the impressions that Moroccan Sephardim aroused in the Spaniards; there is always a mixture of curiosity and prevention towards those individuals living mostly in absolute poverty.”

5 “to fill the leisure hours, to make less painful the housework or craft work, to encourage meetings, accompany games, celebrate the holidays and, especially, to cradle the children.”

song was a popular form of entertainment. Ballads, traditionally sung unaccompanied, were particularly suitable.” (Pomeroy, 2005, p. 15)

The social and physical isolation of the Sephardic community from their Muslim neighbours (Pomeroy, 2005, pp. 14-15), on the one hand, prevented the access to other forms of culture that could expand their worldview and, on the other, helped to keep the oral tradition as Ortega pointed out:

Pocas son las distracciones de que disfrutaban los hebreos en Marruecos, fuera de aquellas que ha importado la influencia de Europa. Las visitas y los paseos, un baile con panderetas y sonajas, muy parecido a la danza mora, y, sobre todo, el recitar viejos romances castellanos de la Edad Media, llenos de belleza y poesía, con una música dulce y primitiva, constituyen las distracciones más populares entre los israelitas de Magreb.<sup>6</sup>

(Ortega, 1929, p. 207)

It is obvious that in the Sephardic tradition the *romances* are both an important part of their hard everyday life and a result of their collective identity and expression, which transmits their rich Spanish culture and additionally reflects their different experiences in their immigrated countries.

## 2 The different versions of *La muerte ocultada (The Concealed Death)*

In the Judeo-Spanish literature, the vitality of the *romance* genre is consistently commented upon by scholars, and its fame among the public is indisputable (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 150). The *romance* is always a mixture of melody (although the corresponding melody is not always found) and text with a characteristic narrative content (Epic, Carolingian and so

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6 “There are few distractions enjoyed by the Jews in Morocco, other than those that have imported the influence of Europe. Visits and walks, a dance with tambourines and rattles, much like the Moorish dance, and, above all, reciting old Castilian *romances* of the Middle Ages, full of beauty and poetry, with a sweet and primitive music, are the most popular distractions among the Israelites from Maghreb.”

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on). They are simply the reasons that make *romance*, a poetry genre, easy to recite. Accordingly, by imitating the same rhythm, it is easy to extend the same verses with similar or quite different finales. The structural flexibility contributes to its vitality and creativity. The Sephardic *romance* has been learned by heart and mainly transmitted by oral tradition, though some people have transcribed what their ancestors sang, while some *romances* were diffused among the Sephardim diaspora from some books that arrived from Spain (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 152).

Among the *romances* which the Sephardim sang, there is one, *La muerte ocultada*<sup>7</sup> (*The Concealed Death*), that appears in a great variety of versions very widely diffused in the Iberian Peninsula (in Castellan, Catalan, and Portuguese), America, Morocco and the Balkans (Díaz-Mas, 2005, p. 331). The common argument presented in the *romance* is that the death of the husband is hidden from the wife. In many versions, when she discovered it, her life also vanished because she was devastated by the grievous news.

More than two hundred versions are compiled and divided into three groups in the monograph<sup>8</sup> that Mariscal de Rhett has dedicated to this *romance* (1984-1985, pp. 19-24). Group I, corresponding to the oldest style branch, is called archaic hexasyllabic versions because of its more archaic theme and form. In this Group, the main character usually has a meeting with death and there are 43 versions respectively distributed in: Morocco (14), Eastern Mediterranean (4) and in the marginal areas of Alta Extremadura (6) and Cataluña (19). Group II is composed of octosyllabic versions. The group includes 85 octosyllabic versions, most of them from the north of Iberian Peninsula, and none found in North Africa or Eastern Mediterranean. According to Menéndez Pidal (1953, pp. 320-323), the archaic form would be the source of octosyllabic versions from the north of Spain, in order to adjust to the prevalent *romance* metrics: octosyllabic verses with assonant rhymes. Group III, called

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7 This *romance* arrived in Spain from the French border, but the French versions were not originals and it has been indicated that the first versions might have come from Scandinavia (Mariscal, 1984-1985, p. 54).

8 The monograph is part of *Romancero Tradicional*, a collection of studies about the Iberian traditional *romance* that was promoted in 1957 by Menéndez Pidal. We hereafter refer to the different groups, using Mariscal's classification.

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“vulgata” by Mariscal (1984-1985, p. 22), has 173 hexasyllabic versions and corresponds to another branch, the most modern style. This group usually begins in a different way from the rest, with the return of the wounded hero from the war (*Ya viene don Pedro / de la guerra herido*), and contains versions from many different places, 8 of them from Morocco, 1 from Dominican Republic and the rest (164) from Castilla, Andalucía and Extremadura.

My focus here will be on the 14 archaic Moroccan versions, because Morocco is the area, outside Spain, where we can find more versions, and many of them are so old style that they can probably be connected with the times of the expulsion. Nevertheless, the archaic Moroccan versions of *La muerte ocultada* are not the only Sephardic ones preserved; this *romance* is also present in the Eastern Mediterranean oral tradition, but it has only survived in a fragmented way as a dirge (Mariscal, 1984-1985, p. 78). The similarities to, and differences from, the other Spanish archaic versions (Alta Extremadura) will be highlighted for the purpose of identifying which Spanish culture elements are of more importance, which elements are maintained in the Sephardic songs through time and space, and which elements are the main focal points of the various versions.

Among the archaic Moroccan example, the version of Tangier, collected by José Benoliel and published by Menéndez Pidal (that can be also found as 1MR1<sup>9</sup> in Mariscal) will mainly be quoted, because it is the more complete version, and contains most of the elements that can be found in the other versions of Group I:

	Levantóse Ueso	lunes de mañana,
2	tomara su armas	y a la caça iría.
	En un prado verde	sentóse a almorzare,
4	allí viera Ueso	muy negra señale.
	Un caballero	por allí passara,
6	-Assí Dios te dexa	con Alda vivire,

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9 Hereafter I merely follow Mariscal's division codes for different versions. 1MR1 represents the 1<sup>st</sup> version of Group I, 3MR1 for the 1<sup>st</sup> version of Group III, and so on; AV stands for Ávila, CC for Cáceres, and SL for Salamanca.

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- que tú me dexes las armas bullire.
- 8 -Assí Dios me dexes con Alda folgare,  
que yo no te dexes las armas posare.-  
*¡Ay! ¡Vágame Dios del cielo, pensamiento tengo!*
- 10 Firió Ueso al Huerco en el calcañale;  
firió el Huerco a Ueso en su voluntad.
- 12 Firió Ueso al Huerco con su rica espada;  
firió el Huerco a Ueso en las telas del alma.
- 14 Ya llevan a Ueso muerto y desmayado;  
ya llevan al Huerco con el pie atado.  
*¡Alda no lo sepa!*  
*Que si Alda lo sabe al suelo cae muerta.*
- 16 -Que si Alda tuviere un hijo varone,  
a los ocho días le pongan mi nombre;
- 18 que si Alda tuviere un hijo vassallo,  
a los ocho días le pondrá en mi estado.-
- 20 Y a casa de Alda tañen tañedores,  
y en casa de Ueso hacían guijdore.
- 22 En casa de Alda tañen con sonajas,  
y en casa de Ueso hazían las guayas.
- 24 -Suegra, la mi suegra, mi suegra garrida,  
¿que por quién teníais las caras raspidas?
- 26 -Por un hermano mío que se moriría.  
-Suegra, la mi suegra, mi suegra garrida,
- 28 las que paren niño ¿cuándo van a missa?  
-Las que paren niño van a los ocho días;
- 30 y tú, Alda, a los tres meses irías.  
De ellas van de grana, de ellas de brocado,
- 32 y tú, Alda, irás de morado.  
De ellas van de grana, de ellas de refino,
- 34 y tú, Alda, de lo negro escuro.-  
Ya se iba Alda, ya se iba a la missa,
- 36 con su lindo niño que parido había.  
Unos la miraban, otros se reían,
- 38 y otros le dezían: -¡Qué vibda garrida!-  
-Suegra, la mi suegra, mi suegra garrida,



### 3 The narration in *La muerte ocultada*

As a narrative poem where little difference in argument can be found, we may focus on how the history is accounted in each part of the narration. The form and the meaning of the onset of the *romance* will be explored, and so will the significance of the dialogues in the narration of the actions, including the significance of some voices and the ending of the *romance*.

#### 3.1 Onset

From the very beginning of the *romance*, four of the six<sup>12</sup> Spanish archaic versions seem to reveal the deep love between the married couple; that is, to satisfy the pregnancy craving of the wife, Bueso, the husband, goes out hunting and is injured by the wild boar. Here is an example:

Estaba doña Ana      en día de parir  
 2 y se le ha antojado    el cuerpo 'un jabalí.  
 Y salió don Bueso      al monte a cazar  
 4 en un prado de rosas se ha puesto a merendar.<sup>13</sup>  
 (1AVI).

We can perceive the husband's sincere love with his wife, which makes him more human and common to the people who sing the *romance*; however, apart from pleasing the wife, there is also a belief in Spanish popular tradition about the convenience of satisfying the food cravings of the pregnant woman.

In the Moroccan archaic versions, in contrast, there is no room for pregnancy craving, but merely a beginning predominated by a rigid formula "Levantóse Ueso / lunes de mañana" (Ueso woke up on a Monday morning) that defines the melancholy keynote of the poem. Monday, a

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<sup>12</sup> In the other two versions, there is just a fatal hunt in which the husband met a wild boar (ICC1) or a lion (ISL2).

<sup>13</sup> "Here came the day for Doña Ana to give birth / and she had a pregnancy craving food for a wild boar. / And Don Bueso went out hunting in the mountains / in a meadow of roses he began to have a snack."

fatal day in ancient tradition (Armistead & Silverman, 1971, p. 177), described at the beginning of a *romance* is usually interpreted as a premonitory sign of misfortune (Ceballos, 2013, p. 53).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the

Sephardim were both devout and superstitious. Superstition might be founded upon religious belief. As an example of this I cite the association of Monday with misfortune. This is a familiar topos in the Hispanic ballad. To the religious Sephardic Jew mention of Monday, and the ill luck associated with it, was a meaningful part of Sephardic culture.

(Pomeroy, 2005, p. 29)

This formula wraps the poem in an ill-fated ambience, softened by the presence of a *locus amoenus*, which is not so paradisiacal because of the imminent presence of the Death. The *locus amoenus* is naturally, given its long literary tradition, narrated in the Alta Extremadura versions (3 out of 6). It is also evident, with an even higher percentage (9 out of 14 versions), in the Moroccan archaic versions realized by the phrase “En un prado verde” (In a green meadow).<sup>15</sup> The fact that this wonderful space serves as a premonition of dreadful happenings is what creates the tragic perception in the *romance*. This contrast is an element that not only enhances the dramatic impact but also contributes to the development of a more mythical ambience.

### 3.2 Dialogues developing the actions in the poem

Having analyzed the onset section above, we can now turn our attention to further exploration of the series of dialogues that follow in the narrative poem. These dialogues extend the understanding of the reader and make clear the development and advancement of the actions and scenes. As these dialogues are analyzed, we can discern a larger variety in the archaic Spanish versions than the Moroccan ones:

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<sup>14</sup> Instead of Monday, there is a climate remark on the cold of the morning in one of the version “Levantóse Güeso / mañanita fría” (Güeso woke up one cold morning) (verse 1, IMR11).

<sup>15</sup> This marvelous place is an element that we can consider natural in the Jewish culture. We cannot forget the references to the Promised Land during the Exodus of Israelis across the Desert.

# I N T E R F A C E

Archaic Spanish versions	Archaic Moroccan versions
Monologue of husband against animal	Husband vs. Death
Son's words to his mother	Son's words to his mother
Husband & wife	nil
Daughter-in-law vs. mother-in-law	Daughter-in-law vs. mother-in-law

### 3.2.1 Monologue of husband against animal / Husband vs. Death dialogue

In the archaic Moroccan versions, the persistent presence of Huerco, the Death, continues to evoke an unreal ambience and puts a varnish over a distant legend. The uniqueness of Huerco's character in these Moroccan versions is brought about by the remarkable dialogue between the two opponents, the husband and Huerco. The dialogue revealed in 11 from 14 versions conveys the same discursive logic (e. g. vv. 6-9, 1MR1) that manifests the husband's resolution to stay alive and be able to share his life with his wife. Listed below is an example of such verses:

-Assí Dios te dexe	con Alda folgare,
6 si yo no te dezare	los mares cortare.
-Assí Dios te dexe	con Alda vivare,
8 si no me dezares	los ríos cortare. <sup>-16</sup>
	(1MR12)

There are dialogues reminding us of the warning reproach that the husband gave to his rival, the wild boar, in the two archaic Spanish versions (1AV2, 1AV3), e. g.:

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<sup>16</sup> “‘May God let you rest with Alda, / if I don't let you sail through the seas.’ / ‘May God let you live forever with Alda, / if you do not let me sail through the rivers.’”

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-Puerco no me empuerques      las aguas de arriba,  
6 no dejes a Doña Ana      viuda y recién parida.<sup>17</sup>  
(1AV2)

The husband warns the animal not to let his wife be widowed, but there is no personification of the animal as that of the Death, and we cannot find the animal's speech.

### 3.2.2 Dialogue between son and mother

After being seriously hurt, the husband is carried home. In the archaic Spanish versions, the husband asked her mother to clean his wound in order to see Ana, his wife, who just gave birth to a son. By contrast, in the archaic Moroccan versions, it is the intriguing *estribillos* (choruses) that reflect Ueso's sincere desire, “*¡Alda no lo sepa! / Que si Alda lo sabe al suelo cae muerta.*” (We wish Alda would know nothing about it! / Once Alda knows it, she will fall into the ground and die.) The chorus is followed by the husband's request to his mother in six archaic Moroccan (1MR1, 1MR5, 1MR10, 1MR11, 1MR12, and 1MR13), urging that if the newborn baby is a boy, he should be named after his father.

The Spanish versions manifest again the aspect of a strong filial sentiment; moreover, there is also room for a final contact between the married couple, and the husband tries to maintain a last good image for his wife. On the contrary, in the Moroccan ones, there is no more contact between them, merely the contact between the son and his mother (6/14). In addition, the testament is focused on his offspring. The husband indeed cares about his wife; nonetheless, the role of their newborn baby remains more important to him.

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<sup>17</sup> “Pig, don't begrime the upper water, / don't let Doña Ana who had just given birth become a widow.”

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### 3.2.3 Dialogue between husband and wife

In the archaic Spanish versions, the relationship between husband and wife is extremely remarkable and manifested through the long appealing dialogue (12 out of 50 verses in ICC1) between them. There is a tender and loving tone, up to the point that the husband, conscious of his impending death, is concerned for the well-being of his wife.

	-Dispéñseme, doña Ana,	que no espere más;
20	doy un beso al infante	y voy a marchar.
	Comer y regalarse	y llevarse buena vida,
22	ahí te queda una suegra	que te asistiría.
	-Yo no quiero cuidarme,	ni darme buena vida,
24	Porque yo lo que quiero	es la tu acompañía. <sup>-18</sup>
		(ICC1)

Additionally, the wife, who has just given birth, complains because the husband leaves her, and he apologizes arguing that he must go to the King's court. Undoubtedly, the role of the wife is stronger than those in the Moroccan versions.

Whereas in the archaic Moroccan versions, there is no presence of dialogues between husband and wife, and after the will and testament, the poetic lines move directly to a descriptive *cuarteta* (quatrain), of which the contrastive scenes efficiently parallel the birth of the baby to the death of the husband.<sup>19</sup> Here the rattles are used for celebrating the happy birth, and this element reminds us of a Moorish dance with tambourines and rattles, practiced also by Sephardim (Ortega, 1929, p. 207).

### 3.2.4 Dialogue between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law

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18 "Excuse me, Doña Ana, I cannot wait any longer; / after kissing the infant, I will leave. / Eat well and take good care of yourself, and live a good life, / you still have a mother-in-law who will assist you." / "I don't want to take care of myself, nor lead a good life, / because what I really want is to be with you."

19 See lines 20-23 of IMR1 in Section 2 above.

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In the archaic Spanish versions after the couple's farewell dialogue, the poem leaps into the dialogue between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law without any reference to the death of the husband in spite of the obvious truth for the readers. What happens in Group III is that Pedro greets his wife and dies just after leaving her room:

Al salir del cuarto, don Pedro que expira;  
6 se queda la madre, triste y afligida.<sup>20</sup>  
(3MR2)

Since the husband is dead, the main task for the mother-in-law is to conceal all the signs that will reveal the bad news. She even has to reply to the innocent widow's questions about the assistance to the future mass.

In the Spanish tradition, the conflict between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is classic (Ceballos Viro, 2010, pp. 10-14). Some traces of that traditional conflict can also be found in a few Spanish versions of *La muerte ocultada*. In the *romance*, the mother-in-law conceals the death of the husband from the wife. It is not a lie to harm or take advantage of, but an attempt to protect the health of the young mother, who is essential for the breeding of the baby. The daughter-in-law speaks with love and kindness to her mother-in-law "mi suegra querida" (my beloved mother-in-law) with a strong contrast to her curse "mi suegra maldita" (my damn mother-in-law) (v. 47, ICC1), once she is informed of the news, as we find in 1AV3 and in another version recompiled by Alonso Cortés (1906, p. 81): "Maldita sean las suegras / y quien en ellas se fía."<sup>21</sup> (RPC 81)<sup>22</sup> (Armistead & Silverman, 1971, p. 260).

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20 "When he went out of the room, Pedro expired; / the mother remained sad and heartbroken."

21 "May mothers-in-law, and the ones who trust them, be cursed."

22 In Armistead & Silverman's investigation, RPC is a reference to the recompilation of Castilian romances made by Narciso Alonso Cortés at the beginning of the 20th century. In his book *Romances Populares de Castilla* (Alonso Cortés, 1906), the *romance* named *La viuda*, because of its characteristics and content, could be classified in the group of Spanish archaic versions of *La muerte ocultada*.

### 3.3 Commentary voices of the others

When the widow finally goes out of the house for the mass, she hears in the street or in the church some voices that say “widow.” In the archaic Spanish versions, these voices that lament her widowhood are from the priest, King, knights, Spanish cultural characters, and many others. However, in the archaic Moroccan ones, there are no specific characters but ordinary people.

There is difference between Spanish and Moroccan versions concerning the adjectives referring to the widow. Whenever she appears in public, all archaic Spanish versions refer to her as “linda” (beautiful); and all Moroccan ones as “garrida” (pretty), an archaic lexical item. In the “vulgata” Moroccan ones of Group III, we even find the word “joven” (young), which carries the implication that the townspeople feel sorry for her being widowed at such a young age. Curiously “la viudita alegre” (the happy widow) (v. 13, 3MR9), which reveals some kind of bitter irony, appears merely once.

### 3.4 Ending

In the archaic Spanish versions when the wife eventually discovers the truth, the widow Ana does not die. In a few cases her reaction is limited to her cursing her mother-in-law. This less tragic ending, resembling the sweeter and more loving tone of the *romance*, makes the versions not so sad or bitter as the Sephardic ones. Perhaps we could associate the sadness and bitterness with the miserable story of the Spanish Jews in exile.

In most cases of the archaic Moroccan versions, the moment the widow falls dead, the *romance* ends. The death of Alda, the wife, whose name is ill-fated in the tradition of Moroccan ballads (Armistead & Silverman, 1986, p. 262), makes the ending more tragic. The name of Alda in association with death may record a peninsular archetype and also evokes the tradition with Hannah (Armistead & Silverman, 1986, p.

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263). We even find a strange exception in these versions: she commits suicide,<sup>23</sup> an even more dramatic climax.

Metióse en su cuarto y echó las cortinas;  
44 agarró un puñal, se quitó la vida.<sup>24</sup>  
(1MR5)

In the archaic Moroccan versions, tenderness has less presence than tragedy, and there are more important mythical elements: the presence of Death, personified as Huerco; the water, as the transit space to the beyond world; or the wound in the fabric of soul that kills the hero. In some cases, the existence of the choirs that recite *estribillos* contributes to this mythical and dramatic setting, as if it were a classical tragedy.

32 Como esso oyó Alda, muerta caería.  
¡Alda ya lo supo!<sup>25</sup>  
(1MR8)

### 4 Birth, death and other aspects in *La muerte ocultada*

The important role of *romance* in everyday life manifests itself in a range of topics that we find in the compositions: wedding, death, birth, festivities, among others. The *romance* is present in all aspects of the Sephardic life (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 158). In *La muerte ocultada*, two

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23 In the religious culture, for both Christian and Jewish, suicide is condemned. Judaism is a monotheistic religion and only He who gave life can take it away (Siegel, S., 1979, p. 23). The drama of suicide is greater than in another type of death, because apart from the loss of the loved one there is religious consideration to have committed an act contrary to divine laws. In addition, in the Jewish tradition proven suicide would imply no performance of certain religious rites with which the family comforted their grief in the company of the rest of the community (Siegel, S., 1979, p. 29), something similar as has happened sometimes in the Christian tradition (Gómez de Rueda, 1997, p. 181).

24 “She went into her room and drew the curtains; / she grabbed a dagger, and took her own life.”

25 “As Alda heard that, she fell dead. / (Alda just knew it!)”

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main opposing elements are present, death<sup>26</sup> and birth.

In our *romance*, Death is personified as Huerco. “«Huerco» es (con fonética romance) el «Orcus» latino que domina el mundo del más allá, limitado por las «aguas»”.<sup>27</sup> (Mariscal, 1984-1985, p. 24) This character, Huerco, represents Death in various Sephardic *romances* and sayings, simply because of the relationship, as in many cultures, between death and water in the Hebrew tradition: “cuando ocurre una muerte debe verterse toda el agua de la casa pues el «marajabed» o ángel de la muerte limpia su espada ensangrentada en el agua más próxima”.<sup>28</sup> (Mariscal, 1984-1985, p. 55)

In the Sephardic *endecha*, there is a special emphasis on the reference to the “difunto *malogrado*, es decir, el que murió en la flor de la edad y sin descendencia”<sup>29</sup> (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 161). In *La muerte ocultada*, the sadness for the death of the hero, who refuses to make a deal with death, is lightly dissipated by the glory of his courageous struggle and with the happiness brought by the birth of an heir. However, the misfortunes do not end here. When the young mother is aware of the death of her husband, her life fades away; and the baby, who represents the continuity of the family lineage and joy of new life, is left alone and becomes an orphan since early childhood. In some “vulgata” versions, the sadness exposed in the poem is accentuated because the baby is killed by the mother as her own life vanishes:

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26 During the mourning period, Jews chanted traditional *endechas* (dirges), “una serie de romances de tema triste y lamentoso, sobre los que pesaba el tabú de no cantarlos en ocasiones que no fueran de luto” (Díaz-Mas, 1986, p. 157) (“a series of *romances* regarding sadness and lamentation, and it was a taboo not to sing them as if they were not in mourning”). A. Larrea Palacín (1955, p. 149), points out “nuestro concepto de la *endicha* hispano-judía no puede limitarse al de un simple canto fúnebre: es algo más: la expresión de la pena en boca de quien sufre la muerte. Podemos, pues, resumir que la *endicha* es: una canción de duelo, en estilo narrativo, dialogada, donde interviene el sujeto para llorar su propia desgracia, de rima y metro muy diversos” (“our concept of Spanish-Jewish dirge, *endecha*, cannot be limited to a simple dirge; it is something more; it is the expression on the lips of those who suffer from death. We can therefore summarize the *endecha* as a song of mourning, in a narrative style, dialogued, where the subject intervenes to mourn for their own misfortune, with very different rhymes and meters.”)

27 “Huerco is, with *romance* phonetics, the Latin *Orcus*, which dominates the world beyond among the «waters»”.

28 “when a death occurs, all the water in the house must be poured as the «marajabed» or the angel of the death will clean his bloody sword in the nearest water”.

29 “ill-fated deceased, that is, the one who died in the prime of life and childless”.

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Cogiera un cuchillo, muy grande lo cogió,  
20 matara a la niña y luego se mató.<sup>30</sup>  
(3MR9)

If the oral tradition signifies in a certain way the emotional legacy in the past, then in our case we should associate the expulsion of Sephardim with the death of the parents and the rise of Sephardic culture with the birth of the child. The pains of Sephardim, whose history is full of sufferings, are reflected in the bitter tone of the *romance*. However, it is not a hidden death, but a kind of death in an unnoticed way; as what is exactly occurring to the Sephardic culture which, after lasting more than 500 years, is dying out quickly.

Over the last 150 years, the persistence of a number of factors accelerates the decay of Sephardic language: the compulsory education in another language, a secondary emigration to the other countries such as the United States, France, Israel, and Spain in the last century (Díaz-Mas, 2004, p. 293), the little prestige of the language among its speakers, the destruction of communities during the Second World War, and the marrying of Sephardim to the other Jews or even non-Jewish people, are just some of these factors. The result is that the Sephardic language is spoken every day by fewer or older people. Quintana (2012, pp. 296-320) described an emotive decay of the Sephardic culture, which reveals the longing for the lost past and the sense of futility of one of the last few Sephardic speakers that fight against a destiny which cannot be changed. As Pomeroy explained, apart from the disappearing of the language, the oral traditions are also in great danger of extinction:

Whilst there is no doubt that, by the first half of the twentieth century, the Sephardic ballad was being replaced by Western songs and modern forms of entertainment, the most drastic blow to its survival came mid-century with the extinction in the Holocaust of whole communities of Sephardic Jews who had grown up with the ballad. It is a sad but indisputable fact that, despite

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30 “She took a knife, a big one she took, / she killed the girl and later she killed herself.”

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the increased interest in the ballad by scholars and the concert-going public, the Sephardic ballad's habitat is no longer the family home and its guardians are no longer Sephardic women whiling away the hours with these beguiling narratives.

(Pomeroy, 2011, p. 117)

Moreover, nowadays, because of the information revolution and the globalized life style, people live with a strong dependence on technology in a sort of unified lifestyle. They sing and hear almost the same international music, watch the same TV series and films, and read the same best-sellers; the elders are relegated to the background and there is little room for the oral transmission in daily life.

### **4.1 The death of Alda in different versions of *La muerte ocultada***

If we study Mariscal's anthology of Group I versions of *La muerte ocultada*, in most of them the *romance* ends when Alda falls dead after perceiving her husband's death; however, Alda's death does not always happen in this way. Only one of the versions, as in 1MR5, details that Alda kills herself with a dagger. The suicide of Alda appears exceptionally in Group I versions, just one case from the fourteen, but it is very common in the recompiled Group III "vulgata" versions from Morocco (Mariscal, 1984-1985, pp. 269-275). The suicide is present in five out of the nine versions of Group III, 3MR2, 3MR3, 3MR4, 3MR5 and 3MR9. Violence goes even further in the version of 3MR9. In this version, the mother kills the baby, who is a girl, before she commits suicide.

### **4.2 Elements related to Christianity in *La muerte ocultada***

According to Armistead and Silverman (1982, p. 127), the conscious or unconscious elimination of Christianity elements is one of the most

intriguing issues of Sephardic *romances*. In spite of the elimination, some elements of Christian tradition are still preserved. So some of the characters have a strong Christian affiliation as Armistead & Silverman (1982, pp. 146-7) detail:

-reyes, infantas, condes y duques- reflejan las peculiares preferencias aristocratizantes de los mismos sefardíes, pero, a pesar de todo, están concebidos como miembros de aquella nobleza Cristiana que había logrado la supremacía política y cultural a finales del medioevo. Es natural, por lo tanto, que los guerreros romancísticos todavía porten el estandarte de Cristo (...); que las campanas de la iglesia anuncien su muerte”.<sup>31</sup>

In the presence of a King, a priest and a Knight, the exclamation, “qué viuda tan linda” (What a beautiful widow!), is found in the *romances* of Alta Extremadura Group I, but not in the Moroccan versions. These elements are certainly not found in Jewish community. In addition, the inevitable excuse of the husband to leave his wife soon because of the King’s invitation portrays a remarkable motif in the archaic Spanish versions; hence, the absence together with the dialogue between the husband and wife in the archaic Moroccan versions can be understood, because these elements are not part of their society; furthermore, five (3MR1, 3MR3, 3MR4, 3MR5, 3MR9) out of the nine “vulgata” Moroccan versions include the presence of the King’s invitation.

In *La muerte ocultada*, we can identify some Christian elements: the heroic fight of the husband against the Huerco Knight, which remind us of the relationship with the Christian medieval nobility; and the mass, during which the widow appears under the eyes of the other devotees. The sound of the bells is another Christian element presented in the archaic Spanish versions. Just like the element of the King mentioned above, both are completely absent in the archaic Moroccan versions. Nevertheless, in the Moroccan versions of Group III, the presence of

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31 “-kings, infants, earls and dukes- reflect the peculiar preference for aristocracy of Sephardim, yet they are represented as members of that Christian nobility who had achieved political and cultural supremacy in the late Middle Ages. It is natural, therefore, that the warriors present in the *romance* still carry the Christianity flag (...); that the church bells announce their death”.



in Group III (3MR6, 3MR7). In one of the archaic Spanish versions, the husband's tomb is even found at a church where the wife always assists to the mass:

- 42 Ya que ha llegado a la iglesia y vio el sepulcro de don Güeso:  
Allí tiraba collares todito lo destrozaba.  
44 *Amén*.<sup>36</sup>

(1AV2)

The Christian elements as the King, priest, Knight, Pascua Florida, bells, and church are strongly present in the archaic Spanish versions, and eliminated or altered in the archaic Moroccan versions; moreover, the Moroccan “vulgata” versions contain a tendency of keeping some Christian features, like bells, church and the King's invitation. According to Armistead and Silverman (1982, p. 142), the lost of Christian elements is associated with the temporal-spatial aspects. Consequently, the short distance between some Moroccan and Spanish territories can explain the persistence of Christian references in the more modern Moroccan versions.

## 5 Conclusion

The incredible vicissitudes of the Sephardic diaspora and the preservation, among the exiled Jews communities, of the Hispanic culture and language, in spite of having lived many centuries outside Spanish speaking places, remain one of the most outstanding events in the history of Spanish culture. Within the Sephardic cultural heritage, the presence of the *romance* is remarkable. *Romance* was an important part of everyday life and was one of the main entertainments of Sephardic communities. *La muerte ocultada*, the *romance* studied in this paper, has been preserved in numerous versions in the Peninsula and among the Sephardim in Morocco.

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<sup>36</sup> “As she arrived at the church, she saw Don Güeso's sepulcher: / There necklaces she threw, and everything shattered. / (Amen).”

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Some peculiar characteristics of the Sephardic Moroccan versions of *La muerte ocultada* can be appreciated best when compared to the archaic peninsular ones. One of them is the absence or alteration of Christian elements, which can be reasonably explained because those elements are alien to Jewish culture. Another peculiar characteristic is the greater preference for dramatic elements: the greater presence and revelation of death, absence of dialogues on love and tender between husband and wife, and utterly a tragic ending. These dramatic elements are in line with the tragedy which is so evident in the history of Sephardim, whose legacy is decaying in modern times.

In the last 150 years, the persistence of various factors explains the progressive loss of the Sephardic language and its oral tradition. It is hoped that this study may well serve to explore and promote the further research on the living treasure, as the Sephardic legacy is. This legacy, after lasting for many centuries, is not vanishing in a hidden way, as the death indicated in the titled *romance La muerte ocultada*, but undeniably in a silent and unnoticed way.

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[received November 30, 2017  
accepted January 4, 2018]



