EthnoScripts

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Open-Source Sephardism: Heritage Re-Inscriptions of Haketia in Virtual Worldly Commons

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Abstract:

Haketia, a hybrid Judaeo-Spanish trans-language suppressed under imperial rule in the Maghreb, is being actively reanimated through digital heritagisation practices amongst dispersed communities of speech. How do digital heritage practices enable the postvernacular transformation of Haketia from suppressed vernacular to an active tool of cross-cultural coalition-building? Drawing on virtual ethnography of the eSefarad online platform, this study examines how such platforms operate not as static preservation but through processes of 'trans situ' heritagisation, where cultural elements are exchanged across multiple sites, temporalities, and modes of presence. The analysis traces Haketia's transition to postvernacular performance, where using the language becomes a conscious cultural enactment that forges virtual communities across historical rupture. Rather than representing continuous transmission, these digital practices are marked by inventive reconstruction and purposeful reassembly, conceptualised here as 'open-source Sephardism' – a framework grounded in diasporism that privileges relational 'hereness' over territorial return. Through collaborative negotiation and cross-cultural coalition, this digital heritage practice fosters the revival of Judaeo-Muslim virtual worldly commons, demonstrating how minoritised vernaculars can be reactivated as living threads of diasporic connection that transcend traditional boundaries of heritage preservation.

Key words: Postvernacular Haketia, trans situ heritagisation, open-source Sephardism, digital heritage, diasporism

Introduction:
Heritage activation of Judaeo-Spanish linguistic repertoires

In recent decades, the shift of heritage practices into digital environments has transformed how diasporic communities reassemble cultural memory. Minoritised vernaculars, in particular, carry affective and connective potential, binding memory, belonging, and the capacity to reimagine a precolonial shared world across distance. Within virtual spaces, these linguistic repertoires can be reanimated not simply as remnants of the past but as living threads of diasporic connection. Such reanimation operates through what Jeffrey Shandler (2006: 4) terms a 'postvernacular' framework, where a language's 'meta-level of signification' – its symbolic and affective value – is privileged over its daily communicative use. In this postvernacular mode, the very act of using Haketia becomes a significant cultural performance. The affective resonance of this process emerges in responses to platforms like eSefarad, where users encounter the language not as a medium of everyday communication but as a vehicle for diasporic connection that transcends

traditional boundaries of vernacular transmission. One reaction to an episode by 'Enkontros de Alhad' illustrates this:

> *Thank you very much. When I saw the channel, I cried. How good it is to find our roots. I'm Uruguayan, from Brazilian parents. I live in Santana do Livramento-RS, on the border with Uruguay. I practice Judaism alone; the nearest synagogue is 480 km away.*[1]

This comment captures the role digital platforms now play in reassembling dispersed heritage collectives. In the absence of an in-person Sephardic[2] community (traditionally referring to Jews of Iberian origin, expelled in the late fifteenth century and later dispersed across the Mediterranean and North Africa), @claudiodachi5829 found belonging and reconnection through this weekly virtual space. The overall ethos of eSefarad is to revive the diversity of Judaeo-Spanish languages and disseminate associated cultural knowledge. Founded in Buenos Aires in 2008 by Liliana and Marcelo Benveniste, the platform curates articles, events, Ladino language seminars, broadcasts, and a weekly newsletter.

Expressions like 'severely endangered' and 'in danger of being forgotten' frequently appear in Judaeo-Spanish heritage discourses, reflecting both the language's precarious status and the urgency for its preservation. Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias's notion of 'endangerment sensibility' captures this cultural and emotional awareness of loss tied to global linguistic diversity (Vidal and Dias 2016). It helps explain why individuals engage in creating transnational, virtual speech communities (Morgan 2004: 3) – collectives shaped by shared memory, heritage-making, and affective connections. In this context, Judaeo-Spanish increasingly functions as a 'proxy' for a broader lost heritage, standing in for a once-shared Sephardic world that can no longer be directly accessed (Breithoff 2020).

Historically, 'Ladino' referred to a non-spoken calque used to translate Hebrew liturgical texts (Sephiha 1977). Following the 1492 expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, spoken vernaculars gradually emerged amongst Sephardi communities across the Mediterranean – hybrid trans-languages created when Iberian Romance and Hebrew lexical elements were infused into local host languages. This hybridity produced distinct regional forms such as Haketia in North Africa and Judezmo in the eastern Mediterranean

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1   Comment by user @claudiodachi5829 on Enkontros de Alhad (2021a). Translated from Portuguese by the author.

2   Whilst 'Sephardi' originally referred to Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, it has since acquired a broader contemporary significance, encompassing diverse Jewish communities from North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. In postcolonial France, it became an umbrella category for Jews from North Africa, developed as an identity distinct from earlier classifications such as 'pied-noir', especially regarding repatriation (Zytnicki 2022).

(Bunis 2008; Stein 2003).[3] Today, what is commonly known or called Ladino often subsumes all these variants under a single heritage label, though their development was regionally specific. The tendency to treat them as interchangeable reinforces symbolic hierarchies within revitalisation discourse.

This article traces the digital heritagisation of Haketia as a process of revitalisation, drawing comparative insights with Judezmo. It examines the divergent trajectories and heritage politics of the two languages to ask several questions: what is the status of Judaeo-Spanish within heritage-making initiatives? What communicative value does it hold today? To consider these questions, I draw on poststructuralist linguistic theory and critical heritage studies, exploring how minoritised vernaculars are reactivated through digital platforms.

After a period of decline following colonial rule and suppression during the twentieth century, Judaeo-Spanish experienced a modest resurgence around 2000, when Rachel Amado Bortnick launched Ladinokomunita, the first online Judaeo-Spanish correspondence group (Held 2010), which was followed by the 'Ladino Culture Forum' on the Israeli portal Tapuz. These early digital communities marked the beginning of a shift towards web-based cultural engagement. A central aim of this article is thus to examine how digital heritage contributes to revitalising hybrid Judaeo-Spanish repertoires. Here I understand 'digital heritage' as a system of translation across temporalities and modes of presence, made possible through coded traces and shaped by metalinguistic and interpretive practices.

This article compares two major Judaeo-Spanish linguistic groups: Ottoman Jews, who speak the Oriental variety known as Judezmo, and Maghrebi Sephardim, particularly the Megorashim who settled in Morocco after their expulsion from the Iberian kingdoms. Its primary focus, however, is on the sociopolitical dimensions of Haketia's ongoing digital revitalisation. This variety developed along the Moroccan and Algerian coasts when Old Castilian and Hebrew lexical elements were infused into Moroccan Arabic (Darija).

A central concept for understanding this revitalisation is that of the speech community, particularly regarding new contexts that bring speakers into interaction (often virtually). The dismantling of Haketia-speaking communities in Morocco occurred under imperial rule, especially during the French protectorate (1912–1956). Although Morocco remained a monarchy, the sultan's authority was largely symbolic, and Jewish populations – retaining the legal status of *dhimmis*[4] – were subjected to assimilationist policies

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3   Judezmo denotes a variety of Ibero-Romance languages that were developed in the eastern Mediterranean, including in Salonica, Constantinople, and Rhodes.

4   The *dhimmis* is an Islamic legal category applied to non-Muslim subjects under Muslim rule, granting them protected but subordinate status. However, French authorities undermined this by introducing a dual legal system: Islamic law for Muslims and French civil law for others.

(Schroeter 2018). The challenge for contemporary heritage activists thus lies in reactivating the language's use-value within a fragmented, post-imperial context.[5]

Given this historical rupture, I draw on Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology to frame Haketia's digital revitalisation. Hauntology describes a condition in which something from the past persists as a spectral presence – neither fully present nor entirely absent. It names what is 'out of joint' with its time, marking what is 'no longer and what is not yet' (Derrida [1994] 2006: 30). From this perspective, Haketia's online re-emergence does not restore it to its former everyday contexts. Instead, it reactivates suppressed temporalities and fractured relationalities, producing spectral continuity that resists linear recovery. Digital heritage operates here as a medium of spectral translation, where language becomes iteratively re-inscribed through acts of memory, imagination, and affect. This reactivation also carries politics of reparation, particularly through the return of Arabic elements within ostensibly Ibero-European heritage.

I follow Marcyliena Morgan's (2004) emphasis on speech communities as formations sustained through language alongside shared values, historical consciousness, and cultural imaginaries. In Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation contexts, these communities are increasingly shaped through digital mediation, where prolonged interaction unfolds across distance, structured by affective presence, iteration, and memory. This shift aligns with Dana Diminescu and Benjamin Loveluck's (2014) concept of the 'e-diaspora', wherein diasporic communities actively construct belonging through digitally mediated practices. Such formations produce 'traces of dispersion' – hyperlinked networks of memory and interaction – through which collective identity becomes enacted and visible online. Ana Deumert's (2014) work on digital sociolinguistics in postcolonial contexts complements this framework by demonstrating how iteration, play, and memorial practices shape minoritised communities' online language engagement. Together, these perspectives frame virtual speech communities as historically entangled spaces where Haketia undergoes continual re-inscription rather than static preservation.

Through these practices, speech communities reanimate suppressed formations of imagination, transmission, and relationality – what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019: 388) describes as 'persisting and repressed forms and formations of being in the world […] preserved and transmitted over generations', conceptualised as 'worldly commons'. The activation of Haketia in

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5   The category of contemporary heritage activists appears 'Enkontros de Alhad' episodes, notably Enkontros de Alhad (2023b). It describes a decentralised and engaged activism to defend Haketia and Judaeo-Spanish through digital media and multigenerational belonging. A related example is the 'Enkontros de Alhad' episode 'Terminolojia LGBTQIA+ en ladino' with Carlos Yebra López, which shows how such activism intersects with contemporary identity discourses (Enkontros de Alhad 2024).

virtual space thus becomes a project of rearticulating diasporic knowledge systems disrupted under French and Spanish imperial rule in the Maghreb, operating through continuous re-inscription beyond static archival apparatuses. The possibility of virtual accomplishment of these 'worldly commons' emerges through what Halberstam (2005: 145) describes as the appropriation of 'the real' that 'always exists elsewhere' – a generative desire that propels postcolonial reclaiming as aspirational becoming, acknowledging both the creative potential and complex entanglements these imaginings carry within present conditions. This reactivation raises crucial questions: How do these linguistic remnants rearticulate suppressed worlds? What political potential emerges from reviving the Arabic components of an ostensibly Ibero-European language?

Since 2000, digital platforms have played a central role in Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation, enabling its re-inscription within shared diasporic memory. My use of 'digital heritage' aligns with critical heritage studies in treating heritage as a performative and socio-technical apparatus that co-produces the very objects it claims to safeguard (Harrison et al. 2020; Vidal and Dias 2016). However, whilst critical heritage studies generally mobilise Derrida's notion of the archive, I extend this framework by drawing on his concept of 'grammé', which refers to the trace-based structure that underlies all acts of transmission, including oral ones.[6] This shift enables me to foreground the iterative, ephemeral nature of digital heritage systems, which rely not on material stability but on continuous re-inscription. Such dynamics enable new forms of diasporic belonging, particularly visible in the e-diaspora: virtual, transnational collectives sustained by shared cultural and linguistic memory (Diminescu and Loveluck 2014).

In Ladino revitalisation, platforms like eSefarad have enabled dispersed linguistic communities to organise through collaborative, dematerialised models of cultural transmission. This digitally mediated cultural labour unsettles territorial conceptions of diaspora, proposing instead more situated and participatory forms of belonging. Jacob Plitman (2018) describes this orientation as 'diasporism': a formation grounded not in the ideal of return but in 'hereness' – the organising principle of relational presence and 'a commitment to struggling primarily in the communities in which [one] live[s]'.[7] Following this framework, I adapt Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2005) notion of 'open-source Jewishness' to theorise digital heritage prac-

6   Etymologically the Greek word 'grammé' refers to a written letter or mark. In Derrida's usage, however, it designates the fundamental trace structure that underlies all signification - encompassing not only written and spoken language but the entire system of differences and relations between signs that makes meaning possible across any form of cultural transmission.

7   'Hereness' translates the Jewish Socialist Labour Bund's principle of 'doikayt', which Plitman quotes from *The Colours of Jews*, in which scholar and activist Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007) discusses the meaning of home.

tices grounded in collaborative participation and co-creation. However, by reframing this concept as 'open-source Sephardism', I extend Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's focus on identity actualisation into an explicitly political terrain. Drawing on Plitman's diasporism, Sephardism here designates not a stable ethno-religious identity but a dynamic repertoire of practices sustained by collective memory, iterative participation, and the reclamation of dismantled worlds. Rather than depending exclusively on inherited descent, this formation emerges through situated work and digitally mediated heritage-making processes.

Haketia's hauntology: colonial suppression and diasporic revival

Haketia developed over six centuries through contact between Sephardim exiled after the Iberian Inquisition and Arab, Judaeo-Arab, and Berber populations in North Africa. This primarily oral variant of Judaeo-Spanish emerged amongst Megorashim in Moroccan and Algerian coastal cities. With a core derived from medieval Castilian and Hebrew, its lexicon incorporated Arabic elements – some inherited from Iberian Arabic, others adopted during exile. Compared to their Ottoman counterparts, Moroccan Sephardim maintained more sustained Arabic contact, contributing to Haketia's distinctive hybrid form. Whilst Judezmo in the eastern Mediterranean – the variety spoken in the former eastern Ottoman territories – remained dominant amongst Ottoman Sephardim, Haketia reflects deeper integration with North African linguistic and cultural environments. Traces of Castilian and Portuguese vocabulary persist in Moroccan Judaeo-Arabic vernaculars today as a result of contact with expelled Sephardic communities (Chetrit 2014; Raz 2015).

Although broader Judaeo-Spanish decline began in the late nineteenth century, Haketia followed a distinct trajectory shaped by Morocco's colonial context. Spain's occupation of the Moroccan city of Tétouan in 1860, followed by the opening of Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) schools in 1862, initiated re-Hispanisation policies that further marginalised the vernacular. Spanish authorities elevated the status of the Jewish community, strategically exploiting their position as a merchant minority to serve as colonial intermediaries between Spanish authorities and the Muslim population.[8] Colonial authorities and local elites dismissed Haketia as corrupted jargon, causing it to lose prestige within both Jewish and imperial spheres. The AIU, influenced by Haskalah ideals, reinforced this perception by promoting French and Spanish as symbols of modernity and social mobility (Zytnicki 2017).[9]

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8   This strategic positioning reinforced existing social stratifications within the Jewish community and fostered Hispanic identification, contributing to the breakdown of traditional Jewish-Muslim relations (Schroeter 2002).

9   'Haskalah' (Hebrew for 'enlightenment') refers to the Jewish Enlightenment movement that emerged in the eighteenth century. It advocated secular education, rationalism, and integration into wider society. It influenced modern

During the French protectorate, AIU educators supported an imperial 'regeneration' rhetoric that framed North African Jews as backwards. Simultaneously, however, AIU educational values and networks contributed to forging a distinct Moroccan Jewish national identity (Marglin 2011; Schroeter 2018).

As David Bunis (2008: 207) notes, later generations gradually shed Arabic elements from Haketia, adopting 'pure Castilian' or French instead. This shift reflected colonial dispossession and broader French strategies reinforcing hierarchies through intergroup division (Katz et al. 2017). The educational and professional opportunities provided through AIU institutions further separated Jews from the Muslim majority, granting them access to colonial administration and trade positions. These opportunities positioned Jewish-Moroccan identity within unequal imperial frameworks, contributing over time to the breakdown of Jewish–Muslim coexistence, culminating in the 1948 anti-Jewish riots and a large-scale Jewish exodus.

Colonial sovereignty imposed assimilation through education and legal structures, marginalising hybrid vernaculars in favour of imperial languages. Derrida's (1998: 40) concept of the 'incorporation of the Other's monolingualism' aptly describes how colonial regimes enforce linguistic homogeneity by absorbing plural identities into standardised norms. Central to this process is Derrida's (1998) notion of 'interdit', a pedagogical mechanism that privileges one language whilst actively suppressing others. In Algeria, the French colonial administration tightly controlled education and sought to assimilate Jewish communities through the 1870 Crémieux Decree, which granted them French citizenship. This policy curtailed the influence of the AIU, which played a more prominent role in Morocco's protectorate, where colonial oversight was comparatively less direct. As an Algerian Jew, Derrida himself inherited this project of French linguistic and cultural normativity. Despite differences in colonial systems, both Algeria and Morocco displaced Jewish hybrid vernaculars in favour of French, thereby undermining plural identities and long-standing traditions. After 1948, large contingents of Maghrebi and Eastern Jews migrated to Israel, where they were classified as Mizrahi. In this new national context, the imposition of Hebrew in state education accelerated the decline of Judaeo-Spanish variants, including Haketia (Refael 2015).

During the late 1980s and 1990s, Moroccan Jews in the Americas, particularly Montreal, initiated Haketia reclamation efforts, paralleling broader Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation in Israel through music, literature, and academia. Solly Levy, a former AIU teacher, played key roles in founding the Kinor Sefardi Choir and musical group Gerineldo, both using Haketia repertoires. In 1990, his weekly radio show *Tiempo de Sefarad en Haketia* preserved oral histories and folk tales, later compiled in *El libro de Selomó* (Levy

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Jewish schooling systems and helped shape the cultural orientation of institutions like the AIU.

2008) and CD collection *La vida en Haketía* (Levy 2012). Meanwhile, the 1990s-2000s witnessed Judezmo revival in Israel through music, literature, and academia (Refael 2015), often facilitated by digital platforms explored in the following section of this article.

These diasporic heritagisation initiatives powerfully illustrate Haketia's shift into a postvernacular condition discussed above. The contemporary life of Haketia mirrors that of its sibling language, Yiddish, in its shift to a post-vernacular condition distinguished by its profound connection to the shared desire to revive it. As Shandler argues,

> *[i]ncreasingly, speaking, reading, writing – even hearing – Yid-dish has become an elective act. Relatively few Jews now use Yiddish because it is the only language that they have for com-munication with other Jews [...] Rather, those who use Yiddish [...] do so voluntarily, as communities, as families, and as indi-viduals. (Shandler 2006: 24)*

Building on this symbolic value characteristic of postvernacular language use, the very act of using Haketia in this new virtual milieu is a significant cultural performance. Each utterance becomes more than just communication; it is also a meaningful act that, as Shandler's work suggests, actively forges community and enacts a renewed cultural identity in the present. Haketia's re-emergence today as a spectral identity and belonging marker can be understood through Derrida's hauntological framework. Whilst colonial suppression and the dispersal of the Sephardi diaspora across Europe, Israel, and the Americas initially marginalised the language, its return in fragment-ed, memorialised forms embodies a hauntological interplay between ontol-ogy and haunting, revealing how suppressed languages reappear as cultural spectres. These remnants act as forms of translation in the Derridean sense: 'an elusive spectre [...] a haunting of both memory and translation' (Derri-da ([1994] 2006: 20). This parallels how digital heritage itself functions as a translation across temporalities and modes of presence. Stripped of its original meaning systems, Haketia survives as cultural residue from a once-shared Jewish–Arab–Berber world. From this perspective, the reinvention operates through what Halberstam (2005) theorises as 'realness' – the way minorities excluded from the domain of 'the real' appropriate its effects. The digital metalanguage through which Haketia is being re-performed embod-ies cultural authenticity, not through cultural transmission but through com-pelling enactment of belonging across historical rupture (Halberstam 2005). To examine these contemporary digital heritagisation practices, I employed a multisited digital ethnographic approach that draws on Christine Hine's (2000) methodology of virtual ethnography, which understands online en-vironments as legitimate field sites where meaning is produced through

technologically mediated interactions, digital traces, and participatory infrastructures.

My analysis of cultural transmission on the eSefarad platform employed archival, observational, and participatory methods. I conducted digital archival research focusing on audiovisual materials. Between October 2022 and June 2023, I followed the weekly 'Enkontros de Alhad' Zoom broadcasts, systematically observing sessions and producing detailed ethnographic field notes. This allowed me to monitor the real-time Zoom chat to capture spontaneous and affective interactions that would otherwise remain unrecorded in archived recordings – such as congratulatory messages, emotional testimonies, playful uses of Judaeo-Spanish, and cultural questions. For my analysis, I selected representative examples based on recurring themes: challenges of cultural and linguistic transmission, the internal diversity of Judaeo-Maghrebi Sephardism, and debates over Haketia's linguistic status as a distinct language versus a marginal dialect.

In addition, I participated in an online introductory Judaeo-Spanish course taught by Liliana Benveniste (September–November 2023). These weekly Zoom sessions brought together students from diverse diasporic contexts, blending historical background with the acquisition of elementary language skills, such as sounds, a lexicon, and verbs. My involvement offered insight into learner motivations, teaching approaches, and processes of community formation.

Running parallel to my online research, I conducted in-person fieldwork in France, at the Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Marseille) and the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme (Paris), exploring the museums' collections on Western Sephardi material culture. Although I do not directly use this ethnographic material here, these investigations complement my analysis by providing a broader context for understanding Maghrebi Jewish identity and cultural transmission.

My engagement with this research stems from my position as a Portuguese scholar working on the Maghreb's hybrid Judaeo-Islamic heritage, rather than from a Jewish identity or community affiliation. This outsider position entailed limits – particularly regarding embodied knowledge and access – yet also allowed for a comparative lens on minoritised vernaculars and post-imperial heritage revitalisation. Drawing on Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of open-source Jewishness, I approach digital heritage as shaped by shared cultural commitments and collaborative participation, rather than by an inherited identity. This outsider perspective proves particularly valuable when analysing postvernacular phenomena, as my position enables analytical distance from questions of authenticity and inheritance that might otherwise constrain examination of these performative cultural reconstructions. Whilst I cannot access certain lived dimensions of Sephardi heritage, this article contributes to understanding how digital

infrastructures foster new modes of cultural reassembly that virtually recapture millennial knowledges and cosmological taxonomies of a suppressed world (Azoulay 2024).

Open-source 'Sephardism': digital translations and reappropriations of Judaeo-Spanish

Founded in 2008 by Liliana and Marcelo Benveniste in Buenos Aires, eSefarad has become one of the most influential platforms connecting a global Ladino-speaking diaspora. Subtitled 'Noticias del Mundo Sefaradi' (News of the Sephardic world), the site curates diverse cultural and linguistic content, enabling dispersed users to engage with and contribute to the continuity of Sephardic cultural memory. Since its inception, the platform has expanded its communication methods considerably. Beyond its original news function, eSefarad now produces and broadcasts programmes, including live streams of Sephardic festivities, whilst maintaining a YouTube channel that archives all video content. Building on this success, the founders launched a weekly Zoom livestream called 'Enkontros de Alhad' (Sunday meetings), where transnational community members present projects and discuss Sephardic culture in Ladino:

> *The main idea was to create a meeting with speakers or non-native speakers of Judaeo-Spanish, where we could propose an activity that could be carried out in Judaeo-Spanish. Without explaining it in other languages, as is the case with other activities, we aimed to understand how many people could follow the programme in Judaeo-Spanish and how many ways of speaking there are.*[10]

As Liliana Benveniste explained, the goal was to create a space for Judaeo-Spanish interaction. What began as a static news website evolved into an interactive platform, with 'Enkontros de Alhad' spearheading this transformation as a pioneering virtual Judaeo-Spanish speech community. With over 200 episodes to date, the programme has become one of the most popular online forums for often self-reflexive discussion about revitalising Judaeo-Spanish language and Sephardic culture.

Regular presenters (Balabayas) include prominent scholars and cultural advocates: Jenny Laneurie-Fresco (Akí Estamos), Eliezer Pabo (Balkan Jewry history), and Devin E. Naar (Sephardic Studies Digital Library). Oro Anahory-Librowicz and Alicia Sisso Raz serve as key voices of Maghreb Judaism. Both are descendants of Sephardic Jewish families from Morocco – now residing in Canada and the United States of America, respectively –

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10   Interview conducted with Liliana Benveniste in Enkontros de Alhad (2021c).

and remain committed to revitalising the Haketia language whilst promoting Moroccan Jewish culture.

Within this speech community, scholars have developed digital methodologies to revitalise and preserve Judaeo-Spanish. Bryan Kirchen, a scholar of Romance Languages and Literatures, launched a project entitled 'Documenting Judaeo-Spanish', which offers a web platform featuring transcribed documents in Solitreo script, translation tools, and a custom Solitreo font (Kirchen 2020). Similarly, Carlos Yebra López, a sociolinguist specialising in Ladino, has created digital audiovisual archives of recordings of heritage speakers and contributed to developing the Judaeo-Spanish variant in the UTalk learning app. These discussions often converge on digital projects that document heritage speakers across generations, build web archives, and develop tools to analyse Judaeo-Spanish cultural and linguistic features.

Alongside developing this online speech community of cultural and linguistic heritage experts, eSefarad organises Ladino language courses. I began my ethnographic research on Ladino's digital heritagisation processes during the language course I attended in 2022. The course strongly emphasised contextualising language formation processes, particularly koinéisation – where contact between closely related languages fosters interaction, leading to the development of new language varieties. Although the community in the language classes is different from the main speech community in 'Enkontros de Alhad', online language learning also presupposes 'community' formation. Following Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), I suggest that learning Ladino requires individual participation in group communication, thereby re-embedding the language in a new social context – in this case, virtual and transnational. These learner communities also reshape the language itself as they appropriate it through tentative and playful ways of speaking within and beyond their learning groups.

Whilst less central than 'Enkontros de Alhad', these language classes unite students with different mother tongues and ethnicities, creating shared learning spaces for Judaeo-Spanish. In this context, Judaeo-Spanish serves primarily as a medium through which members share knowledge, negotiate meaning, and develop common understandings. As Ana Deumert (2014) argues, online language engagement by minoritised communities often operates through playful, affective, and iterative acts that challenge dominant linguistic hierarchies.

As I was the only Portuguese participant and lacked proficiency in modern Castilian Spanish, which most of my peers possessed, some colleagues wondered how I could follow the lessons. As the course progressed, I found Old Castilian basics easier to grasp than Modern Castilian ones. This stems partly from Portuguese nasal vowels but also because Portuguese retained more Old Castilian features, also preserved by Eastern Sephardic communi-

ties. In contrast, Modern Spanish has undergone more systematic simplification and updating.

The class included students from Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Portugal, Turkey, and Uruguay, all with distinct motivations for enrolling. Some sought to reconnect with cultural heritage, whilst others – like myself – were researchers needing Judaeo-Spanish proficiency to interpret documents or conduct interviews. These communities of practice thus transcend traditional ethnic or religious boundaries by uniting Sephardic and non-Jewish individuals from diverse backgrounds committed to learning and safeguarding Judaeo-Spanish.

Together, the expert discussions on Judaeo-Spanish variants in 'Enkontros de Alhad' and during the digital Ladino classes enabled by new technologies operate as forms of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2005) calls 'open-source Jewishness'. Drawing on the ethos of open-source software, she describes digitally mediated connection modes that are reimagining Jewishness through collaborative engagement with declining knowledge systems, prioritising shared interests over institutional affiliations.

Whilst Kirshenblatt-Gimblett highlights interest-driven participation, Plitman's concept of 'diasporism' foregrounds a more politically situated mode of diasporic belonging (Plitman 2018). At its centre lies 'hereness': a principle of relational presence, embodied attachment, and shared futurity rather than geographic proximity or territorial return ideals. In Plitman's terms, hereness entails critical awareness of Israel coupled with commitment to building Jewish cultural and political life in one's inhabited places. On platforms like eSefarad, hereness manifests through iterative digital heritage practices: storytelling, linguistic exchange, and collaborative knowledge-making. Whilst eSefarad remains institutionally neutral towards Israel – a stance that aligns with its self-presentation as a non-partisan news channel – the diasporism it fosters nonetheless enables individual participants to articulate critical perspectives on nationalist and colonial politics. Rabbi Baruj Garzon, for instance, reflects on moving beyond 'sealed' or defensive Judaism towards a more open Sephardic tradition rooted in familial spaces, everyday cultural practice, and dialogic relationality. Extending Plitman's framework, Julie E. Cooper (2023) suggests that diasporic Jewish communities can act as coalition partners in broader justice struggles. Digital heritage platforms are thus not merely archival but generative spaces where Sephardic identity is reassembled through collective enactment – a dynamic, future-oriented re-inscription of the Maghrebi worldly commons in virtual space.

The heritagisation of Haketia as restorative translation: reassembling Judaeo-Arab 'grammé'

To understand digital linguistic revitalisation as an iteration of the 'worldly commons' (Azoulay 2019), this section examines tensions underlying the re-assembly of Judaeo-Spanish linguistic diversity. I highlight how using Ladino as a unifying element has hierarchised and minoritised the Haketia variant. Although this revitalisation project appears driven by a common cause – re-constituting linguistic heritage as collective engagement in repairing pre-imperial, pan-Iberian culture – it remains entangled in the political history of French imperial rule in Morocco. How can we locate Haketia's Arab component in recent print and digital re-inscriptions of Ladino's broader revitalisation project? What sociopolitical potential does this shared heritage imply?

Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation, initially driven by grassroots civic collectives in diasporic contexts like Canada, has been appropriated by state institutions. Like nineteenth-century nation-building projects that standardised vernacular languages, these institutions replicate logics of tutelage and national language standardisation (Yebra López 2021). The Akademia Nacional del Ladino, an Israeli academic organisation affiliated with the Spanish Royal Academy, draws on a rhetoric of national cultural diversity to prolong colonial dominance over previously minoritised sub-ethnic groups like the Sephardim. As Carlos Yebra López (2021: 100) notes, these institutions ultimately 'entail a centripetal process of re-standardisation and officialisation [that] continues to pose a severe threat to the autonomy and survival of Ladino and Ladino-speaking minorities worldwide'. The transition from unofficial, community-based heritage preservation to national institutional spheres creates a paradox: normalising interlinguistic hybrid repertoires into standardised language.

This institutional dynamic becomes evident in eSefarad's framework, where debates frequently explore Haketia's cultural and linguistic specificity, particularly in 'Enkontros de Alhad'. One notable episode, broadcast on 19 February 2023 and titled 'El Prencipito in Haketia', focused on the translation into Haketia of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. During the discussion, renowned philologist Yaacov Bentolila – a corresponding member of both the Spanish Royal Academy and the Akademia Nacional del Ladino – questioned not only the endeavour's purpose but also whether an oral language could sustain literary translation. Situating this act within broader Sephardic cultural revitalisation contexts, he raised critical concerns about its cultural and linguistic implications (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a).

These reflections, though far from consensual, raise important questions about the aims for and outcomes of Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation whilst prompting broader consideration of how such initiatives contribute to the evolving Sephardic e-diaspora. Bentolila directly questioned Alicia Sisso

Raz on the legitimacy and effectiveness of translating into a dialect with no historical written standard:

> *Let's imagine* The Little Prince *was written not eighty or ninety years ago but 200 years ago, and you wanted to translate it for speakers of Haketia. How would you do it? [...] I think you would translate it into Ladino because when something was written in literature, in our communities [...] it wasn't written in Haketia but in Ladino [...] After all, the Haketia was a vernacular language used orally [...] Would it be the Haketia of this translation? (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a: 9:25–11:53)*

For Bentolila, since Haketia is an oral dialect, the sociolinguistic study of its evolving language structures for translation purposes would be impossible, as translators lack access to records that would allow a comparison of linguistic transformations and their respective social uses. With his hypothesis, Bentolila criticises perceived presentism in oral language translation: translators of foreign literature into present-day Haketia cannot access and interpret morphosyntactic and lexical structures used historically for comparative purposes. However, despite a lack in written documents, this does not mean that Haketia was never written. Evidence from letters sent by Moroccan Sephardic Jewish immigrants in Manaus, Brazil, to families in Tétouan attests to written forms of Haketia (Carneiro 2021).

Furthermore, the distinction positioning Ladino as a proper language and Haketia as a minor, informal genre reflects logocentric presuppositions that equate writing with permanent reason or metaphysical presence (Derrida 1997). This logic devalues grammé, Derrida's term not for conventional writing but for the trace-based structure underlying all acts of inscription, including so-called oral transmission. Therefore, grammé refers here to the iterable mark through which meaning is produced and circulated, regardless of medium. The social classification between 'oral' and 'written' forms thus collapses, since oral languages are structured by arch-writing: the system of traces and repetition making all language possible. As Derrida (1997: 316) writes, grammé names the very condition of possibility for any language, whether poetic, pictographic, ideographic, or phonetic.

On the other hand, for Bentolila the translatability of European literature into Haketia becomes understandable when consciously intended to serve a higher linguistic social purpose, which he compares to Hebrew:

> *The aim of translating [Saint-Exupéry's work] into Haketia was not to make it accessible. That was not the aim, so what is the other aim? [...] I'm thinking, for example, of the first literary translations that began [to be made] in Hebrew when the language started to be revitalised. The works of Tolstoy, Cervantes,*

and French authors were translated [...] I don't think those who started reviving the Hebrew language needed these translations; they could read them in the original or in the translations they were familiar with. You could say these translations were made not for the sake of the work but for the sake of Hebrew, to revitalise the Hebrew, to give depth to Hebrew, to improve Hebrew. That's what these translations were for [...] to enrich Hebrew. (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a: 13:45–15:20)

By comparing the role translations played in the emergence of modern Hebrew within Zionism's political project of creating a national culture with the current process of revitalising Haketia in diaspora contexts, Bentolila conflates two opposed processes. The historiography of the re-emergence of modern Hebrew shows that the process was driven largely by written forms — particularly the standardisation of the grammar, the script, and the lexicon — although rabbinical literature also reflects genealogies of oral transmission (see Kuzar 2001). In contrast, the revitalisation of Haketia operates mainly through oral repertoires shaped by vernacular memory, affective transmission, and community-based storytelling.

Moreover, Bentolila's perspective frames Hebrew's emergence as Israel's national language within a 'revivalist' ideological framework aligned with the political ideal of national restoration of a mythical homeland. This hides the involvement of multiple imperial powers and colonial practices in creating the new nation state. This institutional perspective exemplifies what can be understood as a statist agenda for language revival, which stands in tension with the diasporic approach that underlies the contemporary digital practices around Haketia.

By contrast, the heritage revitalisation of Haketia occurs within the context of repairing processes of linguistic prohibition that ultimately led to the exile and diasporic dispersal of most of Morocco's Jewish population. Therefore, extending Bentolila's reflections on the political role of language to the postvernacular framework outlined earlier in nation-building processes, we can situate the ongoing digital revitalisation of Judaeo-Spanish as part of a unifying movement. However, rather than serving the nation state's attempt at cultural homogenisation, Ladino itself represents a diverse expression among multilingual groups whose current speech communities, aided by digital heritage systems, are constituting themselves as a global Sephardi e-diaspora.

Also invited to the same programme on *The Little Prince*, Oro Anahory-Librowicz, specialist in Moroccan Jewish-Spanish romance, responded to Bentolila's question. To underline Haketia's contemporary value for postcolonial redress, she drew on her family's experience of minoritisation and stigmatisation in the use of Haketia in Morocco:

What happened to Haketia when it faced modern Spanish [...] first of all [Morocco] was not yet [fully] under a Moroccan protectorate [...] in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the Spanish–Moroccan war, 1858 [...] and especially later, with the official establishment of the [French] protectorate, 1912, Haketia was impoverished because it faced this, let's say, robust, modern Spanish. And you'll remember in Tétouan, for example, people were ashamed to speak Haketia! You couldn't talk Haketia in the street [...] The Spaniards despised you for your way of expressing yourself: What is this? It has no head and no feet [it makes no sense]! And so it became a language only spoken at home. (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a: 17:42–18:50)

Thus, contrary to the Hebrew example, the ongoing creation of Haketia lexicons and practices of standardisation and the transcription of oral speech into writing, alongside translation and literary creation, serve primarily to safeguard a rich cultural heritage shaped by conviviality within ethnic and religious difference. The 'endangerment sensibility' (Vidal and Dias 2016) towards language loss intertwines with ongoing digital revitalisation practices, which in turn connect with affirming cultural expressions of a precolonial world marked by millennial relations amongst Jewish-Spanish, Jewish-Berber, and Arab-Muslim populations.

Therefore, the performativity of Haketia's grammé — the traces of meaning inherited from previous communication systems, understood as inscriptions of differences — lies in the interlinguistic hybridity that constitutes it. The digital heritagisation of Haketia represents a remarkable process of reassembling the shared Castilian Spanish, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and Hebrew lexicon in a world marked by monolingualism and postcolonial rhetorics, which continue to haunt inter- and intra-ethnic social spheres. By iterating or re-inscribing it in print and in audiovisual and digital media networks, one actualises it with new meanings and enhances its cultural fabric of difference, potentially awakening worldly commons in the globalised Mediterranean.

Judaeo-Spanish digital heritage proxies: generative metalanguages

'Sintoy el viento en mi ḥala', by Mercedes Dembo Barcessat (2021)

Voloy con la ḥala destapada	I fly with my face uncovered
para cruzar el puente;	to cross the bridge;
deshar atrás la tostina	I undo behind me the toast
que me quema ḥatta los huesos.	that burns even my bones.
Levoy mi corassón abierto	I carry my open heart
con mi nesamá descubierta	with my *nesamá* (soul) uncovered,
mi rizos al viento danzan una samba.	my curls dance a samba in the wind.
Sobre hoĵas de laranja	On leaves of *laranja* (orange),
voloy fera del mundo.	I fly outside the world.

In these verses, Mercedes Dembo Barcessat captures the essence of diasporic longing through a poetic language that forms part of a growing literary corpus by Jewish-Moroccan authors who have adopted graphic writing norms in Haketia whilst retrieving sensorial memories of Moroccan landscapes. It plays metaphorically with the author's recollections of personal transformation, alluding to Barcessat's own exile experience and sensational return to her homeland through remembrance.

The exile experience, conveyed by the first line, 'Voloy con la ḥala destapada' (I fly with my face uncovered), suggests movement and freedom, but also vulnerability, where the Arabic word 'ḥala' also signifies 'condition' or 'fate'. Words like 'corassón' (heart) and 'nesamá' (soul) allude to the poet's inner connection to her cultural roots, reshaping home through aggregates of sensational words – each deriving from different languages: Arabic, Spanish, and Hebrew.

At the end of the poem, Barcessat provided a Jewish–Moroccan glossary featuring Arabic and Hebrew words that appear in her poem as a complement to her poetic composition, thereby re-inscribing the Arabic component in Haketia's contemporary iteration, which was suppressed during its re-Hispanicisation.[11] Its online dissemination through platforms like eSefarad demonstrates how digital technology became integral to contemporary Haketia literary practice, transforming not only how diasporic heritage is preserved but also how it is creatively reimagined.

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11   'Nesamá' is a Hebrew word (המשנ) meaning 'soul' or 'breath', cognate with Arabic 'nafs' (سفَن). 'Laranja' derives from Arabic 'nāranj' (جنران), from Sanskrit nāraṅga, meaning 'orange' (the fruit).

Cultural materials produced, shared, and archived by Maghreb Sephardic individuals – transcribed poems, Solly Levy's autobiographical folk stories in Haketia, Mercedes Dembo Barcessat's poetry – primarily serve as what Bruno Latour (1986) calls 'immutable mobiles': stable, transferable objects that can carry knowledge across different contexts whilst maintaining their essential properties. Functioning as 'bundles of figures' or collected objects – such as texts, maps, models, scientific instruments, or collections – these digital materials mobilise different worlds, enabling knowledge transfer from specific locations to different contexts or geographies. The stability, mobility, and adjustability of these texts function as mediators of knowledge. Epistemologically, this heritage process represents a reclamation of linguistic sovereignty, where the act of glossing becomes a form of cultural re-emergence against historical erasure.

Building on Latour's concept of 'immutable mobiles', heritage conservation scholar Esther Breithoff developed the notion of 'ex situ proxies' to describe how cultural materials, combined with data about them, come to represent broader cultural diversity beyond their original contexts (Breithoff 2020: 121). This approach proves particularly relevant for understanding the efforts of language preservation, where records collected 'in situ' – such as recordings of a dying language as spoken within a household of native speakers – are stored and preserved in off-site repositories. Etymologically derived from the Middle English 'procuracie', the term 'proxy' thus denotes something authorised to act on another's behalf.

This proxy function, operating within the postvernacular mode analysed throughout this article, applies to Carlos Yebra López's documentation process amongst native Judezmo speakers for the UTalk language app (as mentioned earlier). However, what proves particularly interesting in eSefarad is that much of the mobilisation of Judaeo-Spanish idiolects is generated within the platform itself. The site primarily gathers speech community specialists in these variants alongside content – poems, songs, literary translations, or artwork – produced by current speech communities.

The notions of in situ and ex situ are therefore destabilised here, since revitalisation mainly occurs amongst Sephardi diasporas in Argentina, Canada, or Israel. This dynamic, which transcends the simple binary of field site versus archive, can be understood as a form of 'trans situ' heritagisation, where cultural elements are transferred and exchanged between speakers across multiple, simultaneous sites, both online and offline. The eSefarad webpage thus functions as a proxy that acts on behalf of the common heritage cause of safeguarding and disseminating Judaeo-Spanish. Simultaneously, it generates cultural material pertaining to 'places' that no longer exist or whose milieus have only recently been recreated by cultural associations in diasporic contexts. Its collaborative heritage ethos can thus be better understood as an open-source 'sephardism'. This dynamic circulation of linguistic

and cultural fragments resonates with Diminescu and Loveluck's (2014) notion of 'e-diaspora' as a networked trace of dispersion through which communities generate and sustain collective memory online.

Following Derrida's (1997) work, the digital heritagisation of Judaeo-Spanish varieties involves linguistic playfulness at the grammatological level, despite constraints from new lexicons and graphic norms, particularly in Haketia. This appears in how writers compose their referenced world through personal memory and poetic reassembly, as demonstrated in the poem above. Such compositional process reveals a deeper paradox: web-based writing functions both as heritage language documenting endangered varieties and as technical code that distances itself from those very languages. This complex linguistic interplay recreates the Jewish-Muslim worldly commons (Azoulay 2024) that imperial powers previously dismantled.

Digital convivência: re-articulating heritage across difference

By tracing the political history of Haketia's suppression in Morocco, this article demonstrates how the processes that drove Haketia's suppression – interdiction and stigmatisation, to think with Derrida – continue to haunt contemporary heritagisation efforts. Crucially, some of the main protagonists of its revival have also experienced the long-term generational effects of imperial policies that exploited pre-existing animosities between Jewish and Muslim populations in the Maghreb as a tactic of colonial governance, thereby exacerbating them. Therefore, this analysis contributes productively to the framework of the 'imperial nation state', as theorised by Katz, Leff, and Mandel (2017), within the broader Jewish imperial turn. Within this framework, the imperial nation state governed through contradictory logics, promoting equality and universalism domestically whilst simultaneously operating through ideologies of inequality based on racial and religious difference in imperial contexts. From this perspective, the minoritisation of Haketia's Arabic component (Bunis 2008) and its current hierarchisation as a dialect of lesser relevance than Judaeo-Spanish spoken by Judaeo-Ottoman communities (Enkontros de Alhad 2021b) emerge as collateral effects of French imperial rule in the Maghreb.

However, despite – or perhaps because of – this tacit minoritisation and hierarchisation, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic coalitions have emerged. Through digital platforms, Haketia endures as a hybrid repertoire rooted in coexistence and mutual recognition. In the context of renewed ethno-nationalist violence, such as the Israeli state's genocidal assault on Palestinians, such practices are not merely heritage preservation but acts of ethical refusal – affirming pluralism, memory, and solidarity against exclusionary logics. Where vernacular languages depend on unbroken intergenerational cultural transmission within stable speech communities, its postvernacular

re-performance operates through purposeful acts of reassembly, collective negotiation, and reinvention that forge new possibilities for belonging across historical rupture.

Given the distinctive practices and epistemological specificities of digital heritage systems involved in Ladino's revitalisation, these communities may be understood as constituting an e-diaspora. As Diminescu and Loveluck (2014) and Deumert (2014) remind us, digital spaces are not merely archives but dynamic arenas where diasporic socialities and linguistic forms are continuously reimagined through iterative, affective practices.

The organising principle of 'hereness' (Plitman 2018), grounded in presence across difference, is here reconfigured through digital heritage practices. Virtual co-presence converges with a temporal axis, where Judaeo-Spanish family languages' heritage is enacted as an iterative act of remembrance and resistance against the suppression of a once-common world. Through trans-languaging acts and collaborative cultural labour, these speech communities, whilst enacting shared memory, iterate a millennial history of *convivência*.

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