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Seth Daniel Kunin. *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity among the Crypto-Jews.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. viii + 278 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14218-2.

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"Fakelore" or Historically Overlooked Sub-Ethnic Group?

This book by social anthropologist Seth D. Kunin addresses a scholarly and communal debate that first emerged in the 1990s and is still going strong.[1] No historian denies that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, tens and thousands of Spanish and Portuguese Jews were forcibly converted to Catholicism and that many, throughout the Iberian-Jewish diaspora, maintained a secret Jewish identity or practices for centuries thereafter. Inquisitorial documents are the chief source for demonstrating cryptic beliefs and practices, and there is abundant independent evidence, including memoirs published by returnees to Judaism, Hebrew prayers dedicated to martyrs burned at the pyre, responsa literature, and scattered references in Jewish communal records. But there is little or very thin evidence that secret Jewish identity or behavior was transmitted uninterruptedly beyond the eighteenth century (with the notable exceptions of the endogamous âmarranosâ of early twentieth-century Belmonte, Portugal and the so-called Chuetas of Majorca). Kunin contends that his ethnographic fieldwork among self-proclaimed crypto-Jews of New Mexico, carried out from 1995 to 2007, and, to a lesser extent, his assessment of secondary sources, demonstrate that the individuals he interviewed descend from forced Jewish converts to Catholicism and preserve a core Jewish identity dating back to fifteenth-century Spanish ancestors. Today, these individuals belong to the ethnic group known as âHispanos,â which Kunin defines as âthe Hispanic community in New Mexicoâ (p. 11). Most have not formally embraced Judaism or joined the organized Jewish community, and social cohesion among them is weak (p. 207).

Kunin employed two methodological approaches in his fieldwork: participant observation and unstructured interviews with 110 subjects (59 women and 51 men). Most interviewees (55 percent) were formally affiliated with the Catholic Church, 27 percent identified with Protestant mainstream denominations, and the remainder with Seventh-Day Adventism, Mormonism, messianic congregations, or Judaism (p. 19). Kuninâs multiple interactions with the same subjects allow him to analyze how self-conception and behavior have changed according to setting and over the course of roughly a decade.

Although he is an ethnographer, Kuninâs methodology differs little from that applied by historian Stanley M. Hordes, author of a separate analysis of U.S. Southwest crypto-Jewishness published earlier in the decade (*To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*, 2005). Kunin and Hordes collaborated together on some of the fieldwork carried out for their respective monographs. Hordes provides the single endorsement appearing on the Columbia University Press press release for Kuninâs book (July 20, 2009) and Kunin, in turn, wrote the foreword to Hordesâs 2005 book. Kuninâs monograph is, in effect, a variation on Hordes's, albeit with a greater focus on interviews and with more

developed ethnographic dimensions.

Juggling Identities is a âreactiveâ study, rather than one that presents an innovative research idea. In the first half of the book, Kunin discusses the handful of articles and books that have dealt with modern-day crypto-Jews and the âauthenticityâ question since the mid-1990s. Refreshingly, he parts company in one instance with Hordes, who in *To the End of the Earth* presented several ambiguous and subjective symbols on gravestones and other material culture (such as six-petaled flowers and figures from the Hebrew Bible) as indications of crypto-Judaism. Kunin argues instead that these âsymbols do not speak for themselvesâ and as such constitute neither âhistorical dataâ nor âevidenceâ of crypto-Jewish identity, except by âthose who chose to use the symbolâ (pp. 20; 51). Judith Neulander, a folklorist who, in her unpublished dissertation and several articles, has vociferously dismissed the crypto-Jewish movement as a recently constructed identity, is Kuninâs foil throughout the book, especially in chapter 2, âThe Case Against the Authenticity of Crypto-Judaism,â where twenty pages are devoted to shredding her arguments. To readers unfamiliar with the crypto-Jewish debate, chapters 2 and 3 (âThe Case forâ¦â) may seem wearisome, but they are in fact necessary because Kunin shows how the subfield of U.S. Southwestern crypto-Judaism first emerged and how it developed in both scholarly and lay circles. Still, Kuninâs lengthy scrutiny of a handful of brief sources–Michael Carrollâs eighteen-page article, for example, receives ten pages of commentary and refutation–makes one wonder if the scholarly debate outsizes the evidence on the ground.

Juggling Identities–as its subtitle indicates–is primarily concerned with the âauthenticityâ of modern-day crypto-Jewish identity. Kunin uses the term copiously, especially in the first half of the book, but never attempts to define or broadly contextualize it. Nor is there any reference to works that do, such as Miles Orvellâs *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (1989). Kunin is working with a limited number of secondary sources and within a narrow conceptual framework, as his five-page bibliography attests. By the second half of the book, it becomes clear that Kunin is using âauthenticityâ to support two arguments: one historical, the other ethnographic.

Kuninâs historical argument for continuity makes up the weakest part of the book. Basing himself primarily on Hordesâs aforementioned work, Kunin alternately strongly suggests (âhighly plausibleâ) or argues (âcompelling historical … evidenceâ) that modern-day crypto-Jewish practices and identities can be uninterruptedly linked back to early modern *conversos* (p. 81). Kunin cites RenÃ©e Levine Melammedâs work on early modern Iberian crypto-Jews, but ignores her study of modern-day crypto-Jewish identity, which includes criticism of much of the Southwestern crypto-Jewish methodology, including Kuninâs.[2]

Turning to his own fieldwork, Kunin argues that the behavior and self-conception exhibited by crypto-Jews today–however divergent from historical or contemporary understandings–are indeed crypto-Jewish if the subjects consider them so. For example, many individuals identify their familyâs spinning top as a dreidel. This is an apparent misattribution, since the spinning top is indigenous to Ashkenazi and Hispanic cultures, but not to Sephardim. However, Kunin argues, this spinning top is crypto-Jewish because crypto-Jews have appropriated and redefined it as a secret-Jewish object. Kunin surmises, without written, material, or oral evidence, that they may have borrowed it from their nineteenth-century Ashkenazic neighbors, who had settled in Albuquerque by the late nineteenth century (p. 174). As theoretical support of his supposition, Kunin explains that crypto-Jews were engaging in *bricolage*, Levi Straussâs concept of unconsciously reusing available cultural elements for a new purpose (p. 147). Kunin also addresses the problem of diachronic inconsistency in testimony. In one example to which he alludes, a woman from a New Mexican family wrote a memoir detailing the ostracism she experienced as a Protestant whose extended family was largely Catholic. But years later, she had reinterpreted her childhood as crypto-Jewish.[3] Kunin explains that such narrative contradictions do not indicate memory invention, but rather a âmove from the weak to the strong crypto-Jewish identityâ (p. 199). Such fluidity is a manifestation of *jonglerie* (juggling), meaning that any group possesses multiple identities which it deploys in different ways at different times. Kuninâs explanations of both bricolage and jonglerie center on the truism that identity is never static.

These ethnographic insights are suggestive in terms of how researchers should hear and assess testimony. But do they confirm that modern-day crypto-Jewish identity is âauthentic,â that objects, words, and practices are âsmoking gunsâ (p. 186)? As Kunin himself notes several times, all cultures undergo constant construction and recreation (p. 14), and â[a]ll identities are authentic as well as constructedâ (p. 28). Any attempt to demonstrate that modern-day crypto-Judaism is âauthenticâ therefore seems tautological.

Kuninâs more emphatic point is that âauthenticityâ also has a historical dimension and that Southwestern crypto-Jews have an uninterrupted link to the distant past. Given the complex ancestry of his informants, this is an ambitious argument. Most of Kuninâs interviewees report an awareness of gentile Native- or Euro-American descent. Why does Kunin, any other researcher, or the informants themselves, consider the crypto-Jewish component of this ancestry the only part of their ethno-religious identity that has been both stable and dominant through the generations? In other words, if a particular interviewee claims American Indian, West African, Scottish, and Sephardic descent, how and why did only the Jewish part of this ancestry, however transmuted, survive in each generation and trump all the other ancestries in terms of the individualâs current self-definition?

A striking omission–characteristic of the Southwestern crypto-Jewish subfield in general–is any reference to parallel social phenomena. One group of remarkable similarity are the Melungeons of Appalachia, who emerged as a nationwide phenomenon at almost precisely the same moment (the mid-1990s) to claim a corporate identity. Melungeons define themselves as the mysterious descendants of Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, and identify as a group that has faced oppression from both government authorities and its Euro-American neighbors. Like Southwestern crypto-Jews, Melungeons and academics (these sometime overlap) claim that written evidence of Melungeon historical existence is either sparse or lacking because of racial discrimination and secrecy, and that oral testimony, the bulk of the evidence for historic and present-day Melungeon identity, is just as valid as largely nonexistent traditional sources. Historians, notably David Henige and Chris Everett, have discussed at length the faulty historical and linguistic methods that inform much of this research and conclude that Melungeon identity has been recently constructed.[4] Like modern-day crypto-Jews, Melungeons claim a stable, core identity that has been uninterrupted through generations of migration and intermarriage with various other groups. Melungeons are not a perfect parallel to the U.S. Southwestern crypto-Jewish phenomenon, but do raise interesting questions for Kunin and other researchers involved in the crypto-Jewish debate. One author has recently claimed crypto-Jewish ancestry as a component of Melungeon identity, the surest sign that the two phenomena may be closely related.[5]

Also suggestive for Kuninâs study are Mary C. Watersâs findings from the 1990s that American whites could choose to publicly identify with any of their ancestral European ethnic groups (e.g., someone choosing to identify as âIrish,â even though all grandparents but one were ethnic Poles), while African Americans were socially constrained to identify as such despite knowledge of non-black ancestry (*Ethnic Options, Choosing Identities in America*, 1990). The Hispanos in Kuninâs study, many of whom would self-define or be ascribed as non-white, seem to defy this paradigm by choosing not to identify ascriptively. Kuninâs fieldwork offers complex material for understanding ethnic choices in America.

Kuninâs chief vulnerability is his acrobatic attempts to present a historical argument: that crypto-Jews have an uninterrupted link to remote Jewish ancestors. His teleological approach (preening all evidence to prove an a priori assumption), the dominance of the optative voice (âmay have,â âmight suggest,â âit is possibleâ), failure to distinguish between possibility and probability (they could be crypto-Jews, but is it likely?), unverifiable material culture and oral sources (the ethics model of the American Anthropological Association he cites clashes with historiographical standards demanding transparency of sources), selection of evidence (Melammedâs critiques and interviews with Hispanos who deny family membersâ claims to crypto-Jewish heritage are absent), and focus on anomalies rather than preponderance of evidence, possess many of the features of âinvented knowledge.â[6] Given that the field of social anthropology is focused on a groupâs self-understanding rather than historic links, it is unclear why historicity (what Kunin really seems to mean by âauthenticityâ) would be so critical to him. Kuninâs diachronic fieldwork and sensitive interpretations of seemingly contradictory or inconsistent testimony are rich enough to stand alone. They bear important implications for the identity construction of a variety of modern-day groups, a construction in which the researcher increasingly participates.

Notes

[1]. The term "fakelore" as used in the review's title is taken from Richard Mercer Dorson, âFolklore and Fakelore,â *American Mercury* 70 (1950): 335-343.

[2]. RenÃ©e Levine Melammed, *A Question of Identity: Iberian Conversos in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154-163; 213-216.

[3]. Barbara Ferry and Debbie Nathan, âMistaken Identity?: The Case of New Mexicoâs âHidden Jews,ââ *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 2000): 85-96; 96; alluded to in Kunin, 199.

[4]. David Henige, âThe Melungeons Become a Race,â *Appalachian Journal* 25, no. 3 (spring 1998): 201-213; 270-286; and C. S. Everett, âMelungeon History and Myth,â *Appalachian Journal* 26, no. 4 (1999): 358-409.

[5]. Elizabeth Caldwell Hirschman, *Melungeons: The Last Lost Tribe in America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 79ff.

[6]. Ronald H. Fritze, *Invented Knowledge: False History, Fake Science, and Pseudo-religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. 12-18.

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