

## **The New Christian Home in Colonial Brazil (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries)**

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The history of the Sephardi Portuguese women, after their forced conversion to Christianity (1497) is a subject yet to be known. The historiography about the Portuguese New Christian women is in its beginnings. The first work that presents the role of the converted Sephardi women in the continuity of crypto-Judaism is Anita Novinsky's "The role of the women in the Portuguese crypto-Judaism".<sup>1</sup>

Women were responsible for three centuries of clandestine practice of Judaism in Portuguese America. They were among the most numerous prisoners of the Inquisition. 167 women were imprisoned in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 1708 until 1735, accused of the crime of Judaism.

The history of their lives offers us an example of loyalty, consciousness and sacrifice.

This paper is based mainly in the inquisitorial files. This documentation provides a unique source for the study of the women in colonial Brazil, and allows a privileged approach to a closed and secret world. Thousands of pages tell us the stories of their lives, families, and their inner conflicts that resulted from a society that discriminated Old and New Christians.

The New Christians were among the oldest "native Brazilians" families that established themselves in Brazil since the end of the 16th century. Since then they were involved in all kind of activities, commerce, agriculture, medicine, law, crafts, army, and also as Catholic priests, including in its high clergy.

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Novinsky "O papel da mulher no criptojudáismo português" in *O Rosto feminino da expansão portuguesa*. Portugal, Comissão para a igualdade e para os direitos das mulheres, 1995, Actas I., p.553). See also "Una nova version de lo feminine: la mujer marrana" in Sanchez, Jorge Nunez (Ed.) *Historia de la mujer y de la familia*. Quito, Ed. Nacional, 1991, p.69-80 and Lina Gorenstein *A Inquisição contra as mulheres*. São Paulo, Humanitas, 2005

As new comers in Rio de Janeiro, the men were involved in business, but progressively they became landlords, with large participation in the plantations. Many new Christians became liberal professionals, such as lawyers and doctors.

It is interesting to point out that in Rio de Janeiro, New Christian women played an active role in the society.

The family structure in colonial Brazil followed the pattern of the Portuguese society: patriarchal, authoritarian, male dominant. The women were submissive, dependent of the father or the husband. The legal marriage<sup>2</sup> (performed by the Catholic Church) was dominant in the colonial society, and the regimen was usually that of common property, with the wife bringing a dowry<sup>3</sup> to the marriage.

The marriage was mainly endogamic<sup>4</sup>. They married within the family or within the New Christian group, however we don't find a family without a mixed marriage.

The marriages were determined by the father, who chose the bridegroom to enhance the family alliances, and were part of a determined socio-economic strategy. We find cases of women that rebelled against their parent's choice, and that sometimes led to a break up in the family ties.

We can quote cases of struggles among father and daughter, such as Brites da Costa, who refused to marry a rich New Christian cousin, and decided to marry an Old Christian<sup>5</sup>. Also, Izabel de Paredes, who opposed her family, and married a groom they did not approved of<sup>6</sup>.

From the point of view of education, the role of the converso women was very important<sup>7</sup>. She was responsible for the shaping of the children's character. The

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<sup>2</sup> There were other types of marriage, but they were not usual. Se Maria Beatriz Nizza da Silva *Sistema de casamento no Brasil colonial*. São Paulo, EDUSP/T.A. Queiroz, 1984 and Eni de Mesquita Samara *As mulheres, o poder e a família - São Paulo, século XIX*. São Paulo, Marco Zero/Sec. de Estado da Cultura de São Paulo

<sup>3</sup> The dowry, when the father died, was discounted from the inheritance to be received (a "legítima").

<sup>4</sup> See Lina Gorenstein *A Inquisição contra as mulheres*, cit., parte II, capítulo 2 "Tradição familiar e a sociedade".

<sup>5</sup> IAN/TT, IL (Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais, Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Lisboa), Processo de Brites da Costa, n.10145., Inquirição de testemunhas. Rio de Janeiro, 3 de julho de 1713, testemunho de Andreza de Almeida.

<sup>6</sup> IAN/TT, IL, Processo de Sebastião de Lucena Montarroyo, n.5478. Ver Lina Gorenstein (Ferreira da Silva) *Heréticos e Impuros - a Inquisição e os cristãos-novos no Rio de Janeiro, século XVIII*. Rio de Janeiro, Sec. Municipal de Cultura, Depto Geral de Documentação e Informação Cultural, Divisão de editoração, p.86

<sup>7</sup> Lina Gorenstein *A Inquisição contra as mulheres*, cit, parte III "Formação cristã, criptojuδαísmo e identidade".

formal education was opened only to boys, who could study in the Jesuit's schools and universities. Even though there was a special law for the conversos, that prohibited them to study in universities, since it was introduced in the "Statutes of Purity of Blood", many new Christians in Brazil and Portugal graduated in superior studies, which shows that there was a clear division among the law and its real application.

Girls learned to read and write at home, and what is surprising is that half of the women arrested by the Inquisition in Rio de Janeiro were literate. Most of the women in Portugal and Brazil were illiterate.

It is interesting also to point out the New Christians had a much more open mentality than the old Christians. We know the case of a New Christian who maintained a school where there was no discrimination – boys and girls and Old and New Christians studied there.<sup>8</sup>

Another important and original fact in colonial Brazil is that we don't find among the New Christian any illiterate men. All imprisoned by the Inquisition in Brazil knew how to read and to write, and many of them were cultivated persons, who knew languages, philosophy and literature, and had libraries with many books.

We find among the converso women some differences from the old Christian women. They were not as reclusive as the Iberian women in general<sup>9</sup>. They led a very active life, in comparison with other women in traditional Portuguese society. They went frequently to the village, entertained visitors in their homes and had encounters with other women in the streets.

They participate in the administrative and financial affairs of the family, and were acquainted to all their husband's business. They interfered not only in domestic matters, but also frequently in business decisions.

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<sup>8</sup> It was the school of the "mestre escola" Francisco Mendes Simões. IAN/TT, IL Processo de Teresa Paes de Jesus, n.2218, depoimento de João de Souza Pereira, escrivão dos órfãos, Inquirição do Rio de Janeiro, 16 de agosto de 1719

<sup>9</sup> Leila Mezan Algranti, "Famílias e vida doméstica" in Souza, Laura de Mello(org.)*História da Vida Privada no Brasil - Cotidiano e vida privada na América Portuguesa-* vol I . São Paulo, Cia das Letras, 1997, pp.83-154. See also the voyageurs La Caille in Jean Marcel Carvalho França *Visões do Rio de Janeiro colonial – antologia de textos, 1531-1800*. Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1999, p.100 and La Flotte in Jean Marcel de Carvalho França, op.cit., p.105.

Some of these women were sharp business women, and according to the trend of the period, they too did business within the mining region, sending merchandising and slaves to be sold in that region<sup>10</sup>.

Frequently we find a network in the families, with a member in the plantation, another working as a doctor or lawyer and another as a merchant, working in the region of the mines. And it was usual that the farmers that worked in the plantation, or the artisans or military, were also connected to the richer families, taking part in that family network.

Women had the right of half of all the family possessions. They had to agree and to sign official documents, and, they inherited from their fathers and from their husbands.

In a patriarchal society, the fathers or husbands had means to control their daughters or wives, and they could send them to the so called “*recolhimentos*” (houses directed by nuns) where they had to stay against their will until they were freed. But, in studying the New Christian women of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Rio de Janeiro, I found only one case of a rich New Christian woman sent by her husband to that institution.

In general, even New Christian families wanted to have one of the family member in a religious career, as this would grant them a chance to prove they had not Jewish blood. In Rio de Janeiro, only one New Christian family sent the daughters to a convent (the Dique family), but several families had sons that became priests.

Big families lived together in big houses (*casa grande*). The Vale family, a very wealthy New Christian family in Rio de Janeiro, with one of the biggest properties of the region, was administrated by a woman, helped by her sons, daughters, and in-laws. They all lived together, surrounded by about 120 slaves working at the plantation. For the domestic work, they had 20 slaves<sup>11</sup>.

Many “domestic” slaves were specialized in some activity, like tailors and seamstress and talented lace makers.

We find in Brazil Sephardi women as excellent confectioners of fruit compotes. One new Christian lady, owner of a sugar mill, had a business of compotes of various fruits that were sold in the city. Her kitchen was prepared with all she

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<sup>10</sup> As Izabel de Barros Silva, a widow that had sent to the mining region a cargo of clothes and slaves. IAN/TT, IL (Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais, Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Lisboa), Processo de Izabel de Barros Silva, n.698, Inventário,

<sup>11</sup> Lina Gorenstein (Ferreira da Silva), *Heréticos e Impuros*, cit, p.43-49

needed for the making of the sweets, such as a big copper bowl, a copper brazier and scales.<sup>12</sup>

There was equipments and special utensils for daily use, and this way, sweets, drinks, manioc and corn flour, bread, wines and liqueurs, ceramics, basket making, brooms, hammocks, soap, oil for the lamps, threads and waving were prepared at home.

When the New Christian women were arrested by the Inquisition, the first session was dedicated to the Inventory – they had to declare all properties and goods they had. Examining their, and their husband's and parent's inventories, we can see they repeat exactly the same values, which shows without a doubt that these women were acquainted with the family fortune.

Concerning Judaism, the documents shows that these women had the main responsibility for the continuity of the Jewish religion during three centuries, for one main reason: all the celebrations, all practices had to be held at home, and in secret.

Thus, it was mostly the women who preserved the Jewish memory, essential for two reasons: first: to continue crypto-Judaism, to carry on the faith and the practices of their forefathers.

And second: every New Christian had to know what to say once he came to an Inquisitorial session. So, women taught their children how to behave and what to say. "Confess or die"<sup>13</sup> was a reality in the inquisitorial Portuguese society. Confession was the condition to save one's life.

The Inquisitors knew perfectly well that the women were the main transmitters of the Judaism, and during the trials, they always asked: "who taught you"

The transmission of secret Judaism was fundamental. Children learned only after a certain age that they were Jews. In Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 17th century and the 18th century, Judaism was taught in different ages.

As for the teachers, they were mostly women, and mostly members of the family – a grandmother, a mother, an aunt, a sister or a cousin. Some of them were really heresiarchs, as they were the first to bring the Jewish religion to New Christian families. Some were very active in this job. One woman, Izabel da Paz, taught

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<sup>12</sup> D.Esperança de Azeredo. See Lina Gorenstein, *A inquisição contra as mulheres*, op.cit., p.175

<sup>13</sup> Anita Novinsky "Confessa ou morre". O conceito de confissão na Inquisição portuguesa" in *Sigila, Revista transdisciplinar luso-francesa sobre o segredo*. Paris, n,5, p.77-86, primavera-verão 2000.

Judaism to forty and two persons, among them daughters, granddaughters, nieces, sons, daughters and sons in laws. She was lucky to die before she was arrested by the Inquisition. Men also appear as teachers, uncles, fathers, and could be also heresiarchs<sup>14</sup>.

The instruction of Judaism was always made inside closed doors, in the teacher's house or in the student's house.

All New Christian women arrested by the Inquisition in Rio de Janeiro were antagonistic to Catholicism. The Jewish faith was sometimes times mixed with Christian habits. In order to save their lives, all New Christian had to say they were Judaizers. They confessed to have – or to have had – the faith on the Law of Moses for the salvation of their souls. So it is very difficult to be sure of their feelings.

Repeating Father Antonio Vieira's opinion, the Inquisition frequently punished innocent people.

New Christian women were very critical about Christian dogmas, many believed in only one God, and they did not consider Christ as the Messiah. Ana de Paredes, considered that *Christ was a great saint, but he was not God, and the Messiah still had not yet arrived*<sup>15</sup>. This was the most common idea in the New Christian society<sup>16</sup>.

Time weakened Judaism and prayers were very rare among New Christian women in Rio de Janeiro. In the beginning of the 17th century we found only one woman that was arrested by the Inquisition, who knew prayers. Only one of her descendants in the 18th century, declared she knew oral prayers, but they were very difficult to interpret<sup>17</sup>.

The dietary laws and the fasts and other practices, were done far from the eyes of the large society, and were the most common among the women. The majority did not eat pork, rabbit or sea food, and all of them fasted in honor of Queen Esther or in the Great Day (*Dia Grande* -Yom Kipur) or did what they called "Jewish fasts".

We find only one mention to *Pessach* (only one woman was accused of maintaining this celebration, but she did not acknowledge it), and there is no

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<sup>14</sup> Lina Gorenstein *A Inquisição contra as mulheres*, cit, "O ensino" p.360-373

<sup>15</sup> IAN/TT/IL Processo de Ana de Paredes, n.4.944, confissão de 29 de novembro de 1715

<sup>16</sup> IAN/TT/IL, Processo de Brites Cardoso, n. 969, confissão de 2 de dezembro de 1712 Brites Cardoso, who owned a sugar mill, knew how to read, and said that "*Christ was a great Saint, but he was not God*"

<sup>17</sup> IAN/TT/IL Processo de Izabel Mendes n.5436

remembrance of *Rosh ha Shana*, *Sukkot* and other Jewish holydays, including the purification rules (the mikve) and circumcision<sup>18</sup>.

Sometimes, in rare cases, we find some women that kept the *Shabbat*, did not work on Saturdays, used clean clothes, cleaned the house and lighted new candles or lamps. This distinguishes the cultivated Rio de Janeiro New Christian society from the New Christians that lived in regions like Bahia and Paraíba, where the Judaism was more present.

To conclude

The main characteristic of Judaism in Rio de Janeiro was identity. All the New Christian women knew they belonged to a people. As most of the religious life was secret, we can never know exactly their deep feelings. But, all the New Christian women were discriminated. They knew they were Jewish – even if this brought the suffering - and they must be considered and studied as Jewish women, as part of the Jewish history.

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<sup>18</sup> Lina Gorenstein *A Inquisição contra as mulheres*, cit “O criptojudaismo” p.319-386

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