

Jewish Identity and Religious Revival in Post-Soviet Cuba¹

The revival of the Cuban-Jewish community in the early 1990s illuminates three aspects of religious identities in Cuban society. First, I will show through ethnographic data the ways in which religion – in this case, Judaism – has adopted two roles: as social and economic aid networks, and as an international communication channel. Ethnographic data juxtaposed with global trends illustrates the particular ways in which these roles take shape as part of the reemergence of the community. Next, based on these two roles, I will argue that the Cuban-Jewish identity emerging from this specific historical constellation is highly instrumental. This observed instrumentality stands in contrast to the primordial self-conception of the community of their Jewishness. Finally, I will highlight the reciprocal relationship between local events and global trends.

Any individual holds within their comprehensive self different ‘selves,’ potentially including a religious, national, ethnic, gendered, and familial self, among others. In short, any aspect by which a person chooses to define themselves is a *self* or an *identity*. At any given moment these multiple identities are in some sort of hierarchical order; a primary identity will be the one most often referred to and expressed while all the rest are in various degrees of subordination to the primary identity, and can be referred to as sub-identities. According to the instrumental interpretation of identity, social circumstances determine which of the identities will become the most relevant to a person’s life in a given moment – that is, a primary identity. In order to apply this concept to the Cuban case, we can theorize that religious identities gained importance within the Cuban milieu once the national Cuban identity began to lose its standing as a bridge to global society and, as a national identity, became less stridently anti-religious.

Compared to the period prior to the 1800s, today’s religion no longer present itself primarily as a political power but rather as a social network². In addition, it is a channel of communication outside diplomacy that transcends state borders; as such, religion emerges as a valuable tool in the age of globalization³. The general reframing of religion as a social force instead of a political force is evident in the local context of religion’s changing role in Cuban society as result of historical events such as the Cuban revolution of 1959 and the economic crisis in the 1990s.

In this essay I will examine and discuss three aspects of religious identities in Cuban society in both local and global historical contexts. First, it will

demonstrate through ethnographic data the ways in which religion – in this case, Judaism – has adopted two roles: one, as social and economic aid network, and two, as a communication channel with the international community in general and world Jewry in particular. Next, based on these two roles, the discussion will argue that the Cuban-Jewish identity emerging from this specific historical constellation is highly instrumental. This observed instrumentality stands in contrast to the primordial self-conception of the community of their Jewishness. Finally, the data highlight the reciprocal relationship between local events and global trends.

Instrumentalism and primordialism, a dialectic duo, are two ends of a spectrum on which we can situate the way identity is conceived. Identity can be seen as an intrinsic characteristic of a person or a group, as it is for the primordialists, or as part of the social survival kit, an instrument to navigate social interactions. An instrumentalist approach to the analysis of identity highlights the function identity serves in a person's life, helping individuals adapt to circumstances.

In the academic debate on identity, in the case of ethnic identity, a primordial interpretation of ethnicity assumes the constant existence of an ethnic entity⁴. Ethnicity, in the primordial point of view, is an inherent, relatively unchanging attribute of identity both collectively and personally. Geertz defines the kinds of attachments that come with group membership as being intrinsic. These attachments are fundamental and non-negotiable. Geertz writes:

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the “givens” ... of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices⁵.

An instrumental interpretation of ethnic identity assumes that some sort of social change – many times resulting in crisis – brings forth a hierarchical shift between one social identity and others. More generally, many social scientists situate the emergence of an ethnic category in a particular historical context⁶.

Eriksen, in *Ethnicity & Nationalism*, writes “Ethnic identities...seem to tell people that although ‘all that is solid melts into air’...there is an unchanging, stable core of ethnic belongingness which assures the individual of continuity with the past...”⁷. Castells identifies a similar component in identity formation. In his book *The Power of Identity*, Castells defines defensive identity, a term he coined, as “...an identity of retrenchment of the known against

the unpredictability of the unknown and uncontrollable...defenseless against a global whirlwind, people stuck to themselves..."⁸. By extension of these notions of ethnic identity, it is reasonable to consider the prioritization of a certain religious identity in a specifically turbulent time in Cuba, as an instrumentalist reaction to a crisis leading to social change, in which a religious network assumed the roles of social and economic aid networks.

The Cuban government's openness to religion could also be attributed to general decentralization trend resulting from globalization processes. Appadurai discusses the interplay between the nation-state and globalization trends, pointing out that nation-states can use global homogenization to shadow their own hegemonic strategies⁹. However, he is aware of the fact that nation-states are threatened by consumerism channeled beyond the national framework. Castells identifies three major areas in which the nation-state loses control in favor of international, state-independent powers: economics, information including media and electronic communication, and criminal activities¹⁰. In western ideoscapes, capitalism has taken root and is the leading economical ideology at present¹¹. As a result, we see more worldwide conglomerates and the growing interdependency between world markets. In addition, we are witnessing a growing world-independent media. National governments lose more and more of their control over the information to which their citizens are exposed¹².

From this globalization framework, religion should be recognized as a universal in identity discourse which transcends national affiliations and restrictions. The majority of humanity defines itself in religious terms, assigning religious identities high ranking in the hierarchy of identities that comprise an individual. Furthermore, even secularity is considered by many as non-religion, keeping secular people within the boundaries of religious identities (although secularity has been considered independently of religion in more recent discussions).

In her book *Friction*, Tsing asserted that universals serve as mobile notions able to transmit 'packages of knowledge' relevant to a discourse from local to global context and vice versa¹³. She writes: "To turn to universals is to identify knowledge that moves – mobile and mobilizing – across localities and cultures. Whether it is seen as underlying or transcending cultural difference, the mission of the universal is to form bridges, roads, and channels of circulation"¹⁴. Thus, universals can be seen as having a symbiotic relation with a discourse since they both construct and are constructed by it. As such, universals can be modeled as both creators of subjects and motivators of action¹⁵. Indeed, Judaism in Cuba in the 1990s has been able to transmit knowledge across national boundaries, enlist more participants and get them to act in accordance to their new social environment.

The Local and Global Matrix

The ethnographic data presented in this essay was collected in two phases. Seventeen days of preliminary field work were conducted in September of 2004 in Havana. The remaining data collection was conducted during January and February 2006. I conducted twenty interviews with Cuban-Jews, 80 percent of whom were residents of Havana, while the other 20 percent were of three other communities in the interior: Guantanamo, Santiago de Cuba and Santa Clara. Due to time constraints, I chose to interview the leaders of the communities of the interior. Nonetheless, in Havana the larger number of participants (80 percent of the Cuban-Jewish population resides in the Havana metropolitan area) and the variety of activities made it possible to interview individuals with different levels of participation. The Havana sample included the leaders of the community, regular participants, and one interviewee was not affiliated with the community. The majority of interviewees were Cubans who chose consciously to identify themselves as Jews. Ten percent of the sample was composed of non-Jews connected to the community by marriage.

Two main reasons influenced the choice of Cuba as the research site – one relating generally to religion's role in Cuba, and the second having to do more specifically with the Jewish case. First, the social and political history of Cuba created a unique backdrop for the Jewish communal revival. The fact that Cuba was for a long time the only socialist country in the western hemisphere – despite its rich informal capitalist economy in the form of a prosperous black market – makes Cuba a country that embodies two of the most influential ideologies in modern western thought. Furthermore, the major role religion played in Cuban society prior to the socialist revolution and the space created by its absence as of the 1959 revolution created an important aspect worth exploring. As a result, Cuban society provided unique grounds from which to explore the way religious identities adapt and transform in modern western society.

The second reason influencing the choice of Cuba as the site of research is the fact that its Jewish community had disintegrated into fragmented individuals with a thin base connecting them to their Jewish heritage. This fact made the revival of the community and the subsequent new identity unique. When the community reassembled in the 1990s, it developed from the vision of several individuals living in a secular social environment¹⁶. Participants in the different communities across the island were immersed in secular lifestyle. Moreover, many of the participants had to be introduced to their heritage. All of these historical circumstances made the Cuban-Jewish commu-

nity a unique combination of secular and religious features while a product of western social history.

The Cuban revolution declared itself – and, consequently, anyone associated with it – to be atheist¹⁷. One could not be a member of the party and at the same time be openly associated with any kind of faith. As one community member stated in the interview, an aspiring student could not declare her faith in any god, or gods, in fear that her university application would be denied. This strict attitude of the revolution toward religious faith had its roots in the social structure of pre-revolutionary Cuba. The Catholic religion was an integral part of pre-revolutionary Cuba, as were the practitioners of Santería and other Afro-Cuban syncretism¹⁸. These religions were highly identified with specific social classes: Catholicism with the white elite and ruling class, and Afro-Cuban religions with the poor, urban, black masses. Part of the general egalitarian agenda of the socialist revolution was the aim to eliminate these class-oriented, religion-specific identities in order to build an all-encompassing identity that did not have any specific class associated with it – the new Cuban identity¹⁹. In short, religion became the ‘enemy’ of the revolution – not as a result of specific atheist ideology, but rather due to social circumstances.

At the time of the 1959 revolution in Cuba, Jews constituted a well-established community. Most of the Jews were able to advance their social status from immigrants to the privileged Cuban middle class. The community was comprised of three major factions: the *Americanos*, or English-speaking North Americans; the *Polaco*, or Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim; and the *Turcos* or Sephardim, who mainly spoke Ladino, the Jewish Spanish dialect²⁰. These Cuban names for the different factions of the Jewish community were not necessarily a reflection of the geographical origin of their bearers.

The revolution of 1959 changed the Jewish landscape in Cuba. Much of the North American component left Cuba to return to the United States, followed by other wealthy members of the community. Within a year of the revolution, almost the entire congregation of North Americans had returned to the United States²¹. In addition to the departure of the majority of community members, the religious atmosphere in Cuba was radically altered. The official change of policy led to a decline in the Jewish community. Jewish schools were closed, and synagogues barely retained their buildings. Many Cuban-Jews were private business owners; although they did not leave Cuba immediately after the revolution, they watched the unfolding events closely. As community members dispersed, forgetting their Jewish roots, many married non-Jews.

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Given such a drastic decline in the Jewish population, coupled with the government's aversion toward religion, the preservation of synagogues in Cuba required a conscious effort – especially during those years when the Jewish community as such ceased to exist. The story of the *Hatikva* (hope) synagogue in Santiago de Cuba is a wonderful tale of persistence and survival. In May 1979, a resolution of the Ministry of Justice put into effect the dissolution of the congregation. Indeed, the synagogue had not had a *Minyan* (ten Jewish adults, over the age of thirteen, needed for prayer) since 1977, which meant that a religious service had not been held in the synagogue since that time. After the 1979 resolution, all the sacred artifacts from the synagogue were packed up and shipped to a synagogue in Havana while the building was handed over to the Municipal Director of Culture and converted into a dance studio.

It was not until 1993 that the Santiago de Cuba community was inspired by the visit of a rabbi from Guadalajara, Mexico, and began negotiations for the retrieval of the synagogue's building and the reconstitution of the synagogue as a house of prayer. After two years of deliberations, the dream became a reality; in 1995, the synagogue was consecrated, and a *Sefer Torah* (Scroll of the Law) was brought to the synagogue. An interesting fact is that, although architectural plans for the interior design of the synagogue were made, the old sacred arc – thought to be destroyed in the conversion of the synagogue into a dance studio – was found intact behind a wall. As a result, a reconstruction of the old synagogue was created through old photos²².

The massive exodus of anti-revolutionary Cubans in the years that followed the revolution included many of the religious leaders of all faiths. As a result, religious infrastructures and institutions were impaired, public acts of faith ceased, and believers retreated to private social spaces. Jewish institutions did not escape this fate. However, because the Jewish community was relatively small, it did not pose a serious threat to the objectives of the revolution; consequently, it was able to escape direct intervention of the revolutionary government. By 1962, Communist Jews were in control of El Patronato (the main synagogue and community center in Vedado, Havana) and headed the community; those in charge were mostly interested in promoting a Communist agenda and paid little attention to the religious needs of the Cuban-Jewish community²³. By 1965, the majority of Jews had left Cuba, driven out by the new socialist policies as well as rumors that Cubans might be prevented from leaving the country. Prior to the revitalization efforts in the early 1990s, the last Bar Mitzvah in Cuba was celebrated in 1973, and the last Jewish wedding was held in 1976. By the late 1970s, almost all Jewish communal activity ceased²⁴.

The 1980s brought with it new international realities that significantly influenced Cuban attitudes toward religions. The most prominent of these realities was the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. Mikhail Gorbachev President of the Soviet Union, led the country through a series of reforms referred to as *perestroika* – a process that culminated in 1990, when the Communist Party officially gave up its monopoly on power. In subsequent years, the entire Communist social order disintegrated. The collapse of the Soviet Union shocked the economic and ideological foundations of Cuban society; in the international arena, Cuba was left isolated as its main economic allies, the European Eastern Bloc countries, were now fighting for their own economic survival.

Ideologically, Cuba was left with no allies. Cubans refer to this time of crisis as the ‘special period,’ which lasted roughly throughout the last decade of the twentieth century²⁵. In 1992, Cuba’s President, Fidel Castro, initiated a change in the constitution allowing Communist party members to be publicly associated with religious faiths, thereby reintroducing religion to the Cuban public sphere. The Jewish religion is not the only faith to find new believers among Cubans; according to Pintado²⁶, a similar religious rejuvenation occurred among both Christian and Afro-Cuban syncretism.

The story of the Hatikva synagogue serves as a symbolic representation for the story of religion in general in Cuba. The height of religious life in Cuba occurred prior to 1959. After the revolution, Cuban religious life went through a period of hiding in secluded private spaces to the point that it seemed as though it disappeared altogether – only to be rediscovered in the 1990s, reflecting connections to the past as well as demonstrating whole new ways of self-fulfillment.

The Community at Present

Dramatic changes have taken place in the community throughout time. Yet, a thread of continuity can be observed and traced, serving as evidence that we are indeed dealing with the revival of a community and not the establishment of a new community altogether. Such continuity is evident in the Cuban-Jewish marriage customs.

Over time the way marriage functions as group delimiter changed, shifting from an emphasis on exclusion to one of inclusion. In the past, marriage to a non-Jew led to alienation from the group. In the book *The Chosen Island Jews in Cuba*, Jose Altshuler Gutwert commented on his own marriage to a non-Jew: “Even without being religious, it was a treif [not kosher]

marriage²⁷. Meanwhile, Enrique Oltuski Osacki expressed the same sentiment: “Marta’s family did not oppose our relationship. In Cuba, in mixed marriages, the opposition usually came from the Jewish side²⁸. Today, given that almost all unions are intermarriages, non-Jewish spouses are accepted in the community in all activities. They are eligible for all the benefits and are welcomed at the Hebrew classes, which are only open to the community. According to one interviewee – Eyal, a non-Jew who is married to Dana, a member of the community – “There are a lot of people that accept me and consider me as one of them, but up to a certain point.”

Attitudes of the community towards education are another thread of continuity. Despite being one of the main causes of the revolutionary government, education is limited in certain areas such as technology. As a general notion, education helps create a sense of uniqueness and worthiness among members of the Cuban-Jewish community, who take pride in being able to offer their youth a more sophisticated intellectual environment. Dana, an active member of the community from the first days of its reemergence in the early 1990s, is a teacher in the Sunday school and an instructor in the youth organization. Dana stated in the interview that, “it is the community’s goal to show the youth the pride in being a professional.” Tal, Dana’s colleague and a past president of the youth organization, saw fit to emphasize that the activities in the community’s center go beyond the regular hang-out and partying that are prevalent in youth gatherings. Members of the community are offered education on a variety of subjects through two main channels: the Sunday school and courses offered by ORT – the worldwide Jewish vocational school system. Both of these educational channels were operating in the heyday of the Cuban-Jewish community, in pre-revolutionary times. When the community reemerged in the 1990s both the Sunday school and ORT were reestablished, expressing the continual emphasis of the community on education²⁹.

Immediately following the Cuban revolution through the 1980s, a loss of interest in the Jewish identity occurred³⁰. However, during the subsequent ‘special period’ – the time of economic crisis and general uncertainty following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought a need to reconsider one’s identity – a renewed interest emerged. The ‘special period’ created in Cuba a social void³¹. The new social and economic circumstances of the ‘special period’ transformed the Jewish component of one’s entire identity into a practical survival tool in everyday life, thereby elevating its importance.

The new Cuban sub-identities that emerged from the ‘special period’ can be classified as defensive identity using Castells’s category. In the face of the total collapse of the country’s economic system and international status

quo due to global events, religious institutions offered Cuba's people a readily available outlet to express these sorts of anxieties and new social solidarities. Combining the already existing communal religious infrastructure, though small in size, with typical human response during crisis, it is not too surprising that religious identities gained popularity in the last decade of the twentieth century³². These sentiments are exactly what make El Patronato, the Jewish community center in Havana, go beyond its purpose as a house of worship to function as a community center and the locus of new kinds of religious identities. Such stability, offered by religious communities in Cuba amidst the economic and ideological turmoil of the 'special period,' attracted Cuban-Jews and believers of other faiths back to their communities.

Religion as a Social and Economic Aid Network

Simultaneously the Cuban government reconsidered its attitudes toward religions – undoubtedly a reaction to popular demand and another way for the government to respond to the crisis. By the 1990s, most of Castro's opposition had left the island in a number of migratory waves. The revolution had stabilized and become a fact of life. Castro's vision of a new Cuban society based on economic equality was closer to becoming a reality. This is not to say that no social injustice exists in Cuba while an egalitarian utopia does; however, the gaps between the social classes are much smaller nowadays. In the 1990s, Cuba's government was occupied with the task of managing the painful transition from one international reality to another completely different one. The national Cuban identity and its proponent, the national government, relinquished control to more marginal social forces, such as religious institutions, thereby creating a social space in which religious identities could reemerge. The opening of this space for religious institutions to function as social aid networks was an act of necessity and desperation on the side of the government.

Furthermore, religious social and economic networks have been instrumental both for Cuban citizens and the Cuban government. Individual citizens use religious networks as alternative for other failed or non-existing social and economic networks such as those previously operated by the government or available under a capitalist ideology. For its part, the government – especially during the 'special period' – found in the religious networks an outside agent that could help relieve pressure without posing a serious ideological risk. Here a historical shift can be detected. In 1959, religion was highly identified with political power and hence considered a threat to the new

revolutionary regime. Forty some years later, combined with global changes in the way western society and religion institutions see the role of religion in society (i.e., a shift of focus from politics to social aid), religion not only stopped being an ideological risk, but also practically became an ally of the revolutionary Cuban regime.

The Youth Organization, *Simja* (joy) the senior club, and the Feminine Association, which are part of the activities offered by El-Patronato, serve as an example of the way religion assumed the function of social and economic aid network. These organizations provide both general education and physical activities in addition to the original Jewish content dedicated to the development of the Jewish identity among the members of these organizations. For example, every Wednesday the members of the Youth Organization gather for volleyball with a professional coach hired by the community; those who are not so athletic can participate in *Rikudim* (dances), Israeli folk dance. The Feminine Association has a Rikudim group of its own. Simja members enjoy bi-weekly sessions of physical education designed especially for the needs of the elderly. These organizations inform their members on subjects like health, nutrition, and general world developments relating to their specific age group. Indeed, the Youth Organization offers a social circle for its members including field trips and parties as well as a clean and respectable place in general in which to gather, listen to music, and play games such as dominos – Cuba’s favorite pastime. In addition, members receive actual material aid; girls get a regular supply of feminine hygiene products. Members receive refreshments at the end of the activities, which are free of charge and include transportation as necessary.

It is important to note that in Havana – and more so in Cuba – transportation is one of the most underdeveloped services. Private vehicles are hard to come by and are mainly a legacy from pre-revolutionary times. All other vehicles are owned by the state and assigned to a person according to his or her position in the occupational hierarchy. Such circumstances do not allow for the youth or the elderly to be independent as far as transportation is concerned. In addition, public transportation is unreliable; a trip of twenty minutes by car can end up taking an hour to an hour and a half, taking into account the amount of time one has to wait for the bus – known as the *guagua* in Cuba. Moreover, the *guaguas* are extremely crowded. The long waits for the *guaguas* mean that, when one does come, the door is “attacked” by the crowds that are so tired of waiting that they will do almost anything to squeeze themselves into the limited space. All of these circumstances create an unsafe environment for commuters, especially the elderly, who might find it hard to compete with the younger crowds for entrance onto the bus and for seats in it.

Thus, it is no wonder that when Simja members are offered a field trip that includes transportation, for them it is not only a question of a social matter but also an actual economic matter, allowing them to move about more independently. In addition, the youth organization and Simja try to offer their members an extended stay in an out-of-town location every year. In these *Majanot* (camps), participants from all over the island get together for three days or so for seminars on Jewish themes as well as lifestyle issues, such as health topics. These occasions help foster a Cuban-Jewish identity beyond the specific local communities, encouraging feelings of unification. Remembering the transportation problems of availability and cost, this is probably the only way the communities from the different parts of the island can come together and share their Jewish experience.

Religious activities of all types are followed by some kind of meal. After the Friday night and Saturday morning services, a full meal is served – usually including chicken, an expensive product in Cuba. For many, specifically the elderly, such meals are the most nutritious they have throughout the week. In addition, all major holidays are celebrated not only by religious and social activities, but also by a communal meal. In El Patronato, about sixty to seventy people take part in an average weekend meal. On high holidays, attendance may range from 120 to 150 participants. Supplies for the meals are paid for from the Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC) delegates' budget; however, the cooperation of the Cuban government is required so that ration allocations are granted. This fact imbues the religious services not only with religious and social benefits, but also economic benefits.

As transportation is not a readily available resource in Cuba, at the end of the services – at least in Havana, a large metropolitan area in which people may live a half hour's driving distance from the synagogue – transportation is offered for no charge and is readily available to the congregants. This fact has both economical and social significance. Economically it enables the less fortunate, who cannot afford a taxi, to participate in the activities. Socially, both the meals and the transportation offered by the community allow a space for gathering and social exchange that most likely would not be attainable to most of the members of the community. Ultimately, participants create social and economic networks with other members of the community and with other Jewish communities on the island. Indeed, choosing Jewish became part of the survival strategy in the Cuban reality of the 'special period'³³.

Religion as an International Channel of Communication

Although eccentric and unique in today's world, Cuba is no doubt still part of the global system. Obviously, due to its own government ideology and the consequential economic embargo imposed by the United States, Cuba is disadvantaged in economic and ideological globalization processes. Religion provided a way for Cubans to overcome the limitations imposed by politics on ties with the international community. Furthermore, religion allowed Cubans to explore aspects of their identity that fell outside the Cuban-socialist model without risking open conflict with the socialist government. In this regard, religion, in appreciation of its independent international networks, serves as an outlet for Cuba from its isolation. In addition, it opened an international communication channel for Cubans without exposing them to the scrutiny of their own government. Taking into consideration that Cubans are not free to travel outside their country as they wish – or even to communicate with foreigners within Cuba – religious networks offer a legitimizing context for such activities.

Religious missions inside and outside of Cuba are a door to the international community, which is relatively free of Cuba's government scrutiny. Religious organizations are international organizations, transcending national division as they have realigned themselves in world politics as social movements, working to improve human society, with no national loyalties. This national neutrality of religious organizations has made it easier for the Cuban government to collaborate with them without risking conflict on an ideological plane.

Most importantly, religion has served as a bridge – a communication highway between isolated Cuban citizens both from within and without. Packages of knowledge, using Tsing's term, of global context could be transmitted to the island (both in the geographical and social realms). As part of these packages, we can consider an example of a lesson on political systems thought at the Sunday school in El-Patronato.

The lesson took place on a day dedicated to Israeli current affairs (about a month before the Israeli election of 2006). The adults had a comprehensive debate regarding Israeli politics. At the same time, for the adolescent group, whose members are just becoming aware of politics, a basic explanation of politics was given. Terms like *political parties* and *right* or *left wing* were clarified. Taking into consideration that this occurred in Havana, Cuba – a country headed by a single party for the last 40+ years, this education is not to be taken lightly.

The teacher Dana approached this delicate matter in a very judicious manner. A 30-year-old woman and an active member in the community since her adolescent years, Dana holds several positions in the community, including leader of religious services, an instructor of the youth group, an instructor of Rikudim, and a Sunday school teacher. She first presented the Cuban political system, with which the participants were familiar. She then presented a multi-party system and defined what right and left referred to, placing both socialism and capitalism along the spectrum. Eventually, Dana presented the major parties involved in the 2006 Israeli election and tried to place them on a right-left spectrum. Throughout this lesson, the youth were reminded that knowledge is crucial in identifying with a party or an ideology and that, with time, they would gather enough information to form their own personal opinions and locate themselves along the political spectrum.

Such knowledge of secular character can be transmitted in the Cuban locality thanks to a religious network. Furthermore, the information can be interpreted and adapted to the local circumstances, such as the need to introduce students to multi-party political systems since the Cuban political system is comprised of a single political party. Another more concrete example of knowledge passed through the religious network would be the computer courses provided through the community operated ORT center, again knowledge that is categorized as secular.

ORT center offers two types of courses: technological, which differ in levels, and non-technological (mainly language classes). Every course is offered free of charge as a service to the community. The ORT technological center allows the members of the community access to technological instruction and equipment that is otherwise difficult to acquire in Cuba. It allows the members of the community and others to gain access to computer technology and the English language, and thus, to participate more actively in global communication networks. In this case, a religious institution has taken upon itself a non-religious task since, in the Cuban locality it is one of the only ways in which this knowledge can reach the average Cuban.

The Israeli folk dances Rikudim are an important vehicle used by the JDC to develop and maintain a Jewish identity among communities in the diaspora. They are another example of knowledge being transmitted bypassing political screens. Rikudim are learned through the instruction of a certified Israeli folk dance teacher who comes to the island for four to five days every three months. He or she teaches the choreography and brings new music to the Rikudim instructors of the communities – in this case, all from the Havana community.

According to Dov – the JDC’s Israeli folk dance teacher – the most significant aspect of his work is the use of the Rikudim as an educational device. Rikudim, including the music, lyrics, and choreography, contribute to the identification of the communities in the diaspora with the state of Israel. One obvious form of identification is the Hebrew language, but there are others to consider – for instance, the familiarity with musical trends in Israel. Through the lyrics, listeners learn what issues occupy the minds of Israeli artists as well as how these issues are similar or different from the ones Cuban artists explore. In this way, Rikudim serve as an international bridge through which knowledge pertaining to current world Jewry can be transmitted and adapted in different localities.

Here is an example to the ways Rikudim brought about new knowledge. One afternoon I was asked to translate one of the favorite dance songs of the young children (ages four to twelve). Through the translation of an Israeli Hip Hop song, the children and their teachers became familiar with, not only, the slang used in current Hebrew, but also some of the cultural context I explained in order for the words to make sense. The fact that the song was of the Hip Hop genre contributed to its popularity among the youth. As such, Hebrew – and through it, Israel – became more accessible to them.

Rikudim are used to create a connection not only with Israel, but also with other communities of the diaspora and even among the communities in Cuba. In March 2006, the Emuna group, the dance group of the community of Havana, with a couple of dancers from other communities on the island, traveled to Mexico to participate in the *Aviv* (spring) dance festival, an Israeli folk dance competition among the Mexican-Jewish communities. It was a unique opportunity for the members of the Cuban-Jewish community to interact with other Jews of the diaspora as well as travel outside of Cuba. Thus, Rikudim serve as a both physical and mental bridge to the global Jewish community.

Another such physical and mental bridge to the rest of the Jewish diaspora is the yearly *Taglit* (discovery) program, also known as the Birth Right program. This program gathers Jewish youth from all over the world in Israel for two weeks in spring to give them the opportunity to meet with other Jewish youth from around the world and experience the Jewish state. In the Cuban case, since the community does not have the funds to send its own youth, the Canadian Jewish congregation subsidizes the Cuban participants in the yearly expedition. Only members of the community who have been participating regularly for at least two years are eligible to participate in the program. The Taglit program aims to evoke feelings of identification and belonging among the different Jewish communities around the globe and to

the Jewish state. The one place that evoked the strongest emotions in those Cuban-Jews who have visited Israel as part of Taglit was the Western Wall – the last relic from the ancient temple in Jerusalem, echoing the status of Israel as the holy land and a connecting thread through two thousand years of Jewish history.

These travel opportunities and the added value of interaction with Jews outside of Cuba are priceless opportunities. Cuban-Jews are able to acquire knowledge of Jewish relevance – both directly and indirectly – that otherwise would not be available to them. Through such activities, along with education and religious missions, the universality of religion serves as a communication channel opening a path between Cubans and the international community.

Primordial and Instrumental Perspectives on Identity

Members of the Cuban-Jewish community have a primordialist approach to their Jewishness, having a firm belief in who they are – that it is just destined to be so. During the interviews, several members of the community referred to their Jewish ancestry as an unquestionable state. Ab, a twenty-year-old male who grew up in a non-Jewish environment, is Jewish through his father, but not his mother. Three years ago, Ab was introduced to the Jewish community by his cousin, who brought him to the synagogue to celebrate Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). In recalling how he told his family that he had decided to practice Judaism and be part of the community in Havana, Ab stated: "...I told them that I am going to be Jewish because this is what I was born, born in reality." Meanwhile, Alon – a 24-year-old male member of El Patronato – is a Jew through his mother's side of the family. Although he knew of his Jewish heritage throughout his life, he neither participated in nor knew of the existence of the community until three years before his interview. When asked what it meant for him to be Jewish, he responded: "... being part of the Jewish community worldwide is something that makes me feel that I *do* belong there ... even if I did not want to, I was a member of it..." Another interviewee, Moti – a self-proclaimed Cuban-Jewish painter and a central figure in the Santiago de Cuba community – was raised in a Jewish home in which his aunt continually maintained a kosher lifestyle. Moti commented: "...we are like this [Jewish] because our grandparents were like this and our great grandparents were like that – all the way back. We are like this so we have to keep on being who we are, we cannot change."

The Jews interviewed in Cuba expressed primordialist convictions. I in contrast came to see their Jewish identities through an instrumentalist lens. This is not to negate their primordial perception; however, instrumentalism is crucial in this case and should be pointed out even if it is not recognized by the subjects themselves. The Jewish association in a member's life played a major role in the motivation for the revitalization of the community. The first resource to be tapped into when the community reestablished itself was the Passover rations lists, an instrumental part of life that evidently was the strongest link to Judaism among the Jews left on the island after the revolution. The Passover ration lists recorded all those who were affiliated with the community and thus were entitled for special food rations to facilitate the holiday celebrations.

In addition, membership was instrumental in escaping the poor prospects offered by the crumbling Cuban economy through immigration to Israel, thus serving as an international channel of communication not only through education and travel opportunities, but also through immigration. By choosing to identify themselves as Jews, community members found positive resources to augment their lives. They reciprocated by investing their time and emotions back into the community.

Conclusion

The social frames within which the communal activities take place, the organizations operating in the community such as Simja, ORT, the Sunday school, and even the close connection between the JDC and the Cuban-Jewish community are all relics from the old community; all were reestablished with the revival of the community. Although the vessels for group organization have remained the same, their content has been refreshed and modified. The criteria for group belonging has undergone similar changes. Familial relations through blood and marriage are still the mediums that set group belonging; however, within these categories, the exact thresholds have shifted over time.

The revitalization of religious life in Cuba at the time of the 'special period' was no coincidence. Although the socialist revolution excluded religion from Cuba's social life, Castro – Cuba's president since 1959 – has been in communication with religious leaders in Latin America since the 1970s³⁴. When historical circumstances – namely, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc – presented the need, Castro and the revolutionary government opened Cuban society to the operation of religious organizations. Thus, during the 'spe-

cial period,' religious organizations came to function as a social pivot around which communities emerged in response to crisis. Religious identities became instrumental in everyday life serving both as social and economic aid networks.

In addition, religions also serve as international communication channels. The religious international channel works to and from Cuba. Religion legitimizes communication with outsiders within Cuba, where the government discourages its citizens from interacting with foreigners. Meanwhile, religious missions are one of the few ways in which United States citizens could interact and even visit Cuba throughout almost five decades of economic embargo. In other words, religions and their global institutions serve as platform for Cubans to engage in international relations outside the national framework.

The religious revival in Cuba should be contextualized within world trends. A pendulum-like motion of influence from global to local and vice versa can be observed. Local events in Cuba (i.e., the revolution of 1959 and the subsequent interactions with religions) were part of the global secularization trends in the west. Meanwhile, global events such as globalization and the shifts in world powers (e.g., the collapse of the Eastern Bloc) have brought about change in religiosity in the Cuban locality. Such changes have augmented a global trend of religious intensification around the world. Although Cuba's own historical events have contributed largely to the revitalization of religious movements in the country, this process is part of a global trend in which religiosity regains social, and as a result, political power.

Notes:

1. This research was done as part of my M.A. thesis at California State University, Los Angeles. I would like to thank Dr. Beth Baker-Cristales and Tamar Shafirstein, without which this project would not have materialized.
2. See Daniele Hervieu-Leger, "Tradition, Innovation and Modernity: Research Notes," *Social Compass* 36(1989): 71-81 and Arnold M. Eisen, "Rethinking Jewish Modernity," *Jewish Social Studies* 1(1994): 1-21.
3. Perera Pintado, Ana C., "Religion and Cuban Identity in a Transnational Context," *Latin American Perspectives* 140 (2005): 147-173 and Sarah J Mahler and Karin Hansing, "Towards a Transnationalism of the Middle: How Transnationa

Religious Practices Help Bridge the Divides Between Cuab and Miami”, *ibid*, 121-146.

4. The Cuban-Jewish identity – like any other Jewish identity – is a combination of two components: a religious aspect and an ethnic aspect. Variation is expressed in the extent of the relative part that each assumes of a single identity. The ultra-orthodox Jewish sector is an example of a high religious relevance in which ethnicity is marginal. In contrast, secular Jews in the United States and Europe tend to marginalize – if not ignore altogether – the religious aspect of their Jewishness and refer to it primarily as ethnicity, if at all. Although the focus of this article is religion and religious identities, it will not be complete without some consideration of the ethnic aspects of this identity and the way in which it manipulates the identity as a whole. Cf. Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1993); Zvi Gitelman, “The Meanings of Jewishness in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine”, in *Contemporary Jewries*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yosef Gorny and Yaacov Ro’I (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 194-215; Jonathan Webber, “Jews and Judaism in Contemporary Europe: Religion or Ethnic Group?”, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20 (1997): 257-279.
5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 259.
6. See Fredrik Barth, “Introduction”, in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1969); Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*; Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: SAGE Publications Ltd.), 1-17; Gabriel Sheffer, “A Nation and Its Diaspora: A Re-Examination of Israeli-Jewish Diaspora Relations”, *Diaspora* 11 (2002); Tsvi Blanchard, “How to Think about Being Jewish in the Twenty-First Century: A New Model of Jewish Identity Construction”, *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 79 (2002): 37-45; Gitelman, *The Meaning of Jewishness*; Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
7. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 68.
8. P. 67
9. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996
10. Castells, *The power of identity*.
11. Jonathan Friedman, “Globalization and Localization”, in *The Anthropology of Globalization: a Reader*, ed. Renato Rosaldo and Jonathan Xavier Inda (Malden: Blackwell Publishers), 233-246.

12. Castells, *op. cit.*
13. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
14. Tsing, *op. cit.*, 7.
15. See Katy Gardner, "Mixed Messages", in *Discourses of Development*, ed. R.D. Grillo and R.L. Stirrat (New York: Berg, 1997), 133-155; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Arun Agrawal, "Environmentality: Community, Intimate Government, and the Making of Environmental Subjects in Kumaon, India," *Current Anthropology* 46 (2005): 161-190.
16. See Maritza Corrales, *The Chosen Island Jews in Cuba* (Chicago: Salsedo Press Inc., 2005).
17. Mahler and Hansing, *op. cit.*
18. Pintado, *op. cit.*
19. Dr. Cardenas' interview with author, September 16, 2004
20. Robert M. Levin, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).
21. Dana Evan Kaplan, "The Jews of Cuba Since the Castro Revolution", in *American Jewish Year Book*, 2001.
22. Eugenia Farin Levy, *Sinagoga De Santiago De Cuba*. Santiago de Cuba: Comunidad Hebrea de Santaigo de Cuba, 1997
23. Kahn, Jeffrey A. Kahn, *The History of the Jewish Colony in Cuba*. Thesis, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 1981.
24. Kaplan, *op. cit.* .
25. Pintado, *op. cit.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Corrales, *The Chosen Land*, 104
28. *Ibid.*, 136
29. ORT. *Mission Statement*. <http://www.ort.org/asp/article.asp?id=309> (accessed 07 13, 2006).
30. Corrales, *op. cit.*
31. Pintado, *op. cit.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. Eriksen, *op. cit.*, Webber, *op. cit.*
34. Frei Betto, *Fidel and Religion*. Sydney: Pathfinder Press, 1986.