

## JUDEO-SPANISH RIDDLES FROM MACEDONIA

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The article is dedicated to the research of riddles from the oral tradition of the Macedonian Sephardim, specifically the corpus collected by the American linguist Max A. Luria in Monastir in 1927 (published in 1930). The analysis is focused on various aspects of the riddle as a minor folkloric genre, the status of this genre in the Sephardic folkloric system, and the comparison of Sephardic riddles from Monastir with Serbian riddles (including Kosovo and Metohija).

**Key words:** oral tradition, riddles, generic features of riddles, comparative study of riddles, Judeo-Spanish riddles, Serbian riddles

### The Luria Collection

In the framework of interest for Sephardic life and culture in the Balkans, Macedonia is an obviously neglected area. This is especially true in the domain of folklore. The corpus of Sephardic folklore from Macedonia is very limited (Vidaković-Petrov, 2011). There are few collections and even fewer studies, predominantly linguistic i.e. dealing with the Judeo-Spanish dialects of Skopje and Monastir (Bitola). In addition to sporadic collections - Manuel Manrique de Lara (1911), Ernesto Jiménez Caballero (1929), Israel J. Katz (1961), Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman (1962), Susana Weich Shahak and *Aquí Yerushalaim* – there are only three major collections.<sup>1</sup> The first is that of Max A. Luria collected in Monastir in 1927. The second, collected by Cynthia M. Crews, is a corpus recorded in Monastir and Skopje in 1930, consisting exclusively of tales (Crews, 1935). The third major collection, recorded in the early sixties by Žamila Kolonomos (the only collector from the Macedonian Sephardic community), consists of tales and proverbs from Monastir and Skopje (Kolonomos, 1978).

The Luria collection (Luria, 1930) is to my mind the most important and interesting one. The several reasons why this is so include: the time of collection, the age and profile of the informants, the generic variety of the collection, and the quality of folkloric material. Regarding the romances in this collection, Armistead and Silverman have commented that they offer "a unique and, as it turns out, dramatically revealing view of a heretofore almost totally unknown branch of Eastern Sephardic balladry". The romances include some extremely rare types "of which only sparse records are known from the other Eastern communities" (Armistead and Silverman, 1980-1984: 13). Furthermore, Luria's collection is

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<sup>1</sup> For these collectors and collections see K. Vidaković-Petrov 2011.

the only one featuring a much neglected genre of Sephardic folklore: riddles (*endivinas, adivinanzas*). These are the only Sephardic riddles collected in Macedonia and Yugoslavia. In addition, in the very small corpus of Sephardic riddles, Luria's collection holds an outstanding position because Luria was the first among modern collectors to draw attention to this genre because he collected 34 riddles, much less than the number of proverbs he recorded, but still a substantial number, especially considering the very small corpus of Sephardic riddles collected to date (the only larger collection is that of A. Galante consisting of 47 riddles from Greece published in 1948) and because the folkloric material provided by his informants is of high authenticity and quality. Although the riddles from Monastir have attracted little attention from scholars in the field, together with the romances from Monastir they are the folkloric material providing the corpus from Macedonia with special significance.

A recently published article by María Sánchez Pérez, "Acertijos y adivinanzas en el periódico sefardi *Ilustra Guerta de Historia* (Viena, 1880-1882)" provides data on the small number of collectors of Sephardic riddles as well as scholars studying them (Sanchez Perez, 2013: 237-238). She does not fail to stress the importance of the Luria collection: "Siguiendo estos estudios, parece que la collección más antigua y extensa de adivinanzas judeoespañolas se encuentra incluida en el libro de Max A. Luria sobre el judeoespañol de Monastir (1930) donde aparecían recogidas un total de treinta y cuatro adivinanzas" (Sanchez Perez, 2013: 236).

Among the scholars who studied Sephardic riddles, including examples from the Luria collection, are Armistead and Silverman (1983, 1984a, 1984b, 1998) and Tamar Alexander (2006-2007). On various occasions Armistead and Silverman drew attention to the need to study the Sephardic heritage not only in relation to Hispanic literature and the Jewish tradition, but also in relation to the culture of the post-expulsion environment, specifically the Balkans in the case of the northern branch of the Eastern Sephardic area. Their work has pioneering significance regarding the study of the ties between Sephardic folklore and the multiple cultures (Greek, Turkish, Slavic, and Rumanian) of the Balkans. As observed by Alexander, Armistead and Silverman highlighted the close correspondence between a Sephardic riddle and three Balkan analogues from the Greek, Turkish and Serbian traditions (Alexander, 2006-2007: 3). In another article, the same authors pointed to the analogy of another Sephardic riddle with a Hispanic source (Alexander, 2006-2007: 4). In her own study on Sephardic riddles, Alexander cites a Sephardic riddle based on a formula derived from the Biblical *Proverbs*, highlighting the Jewish connection (Alexander, 2006-2007: 6).

Although the riddle is a minor genre in the folkloric system of the Balkan Sephardim, its study requires a major effort if the scholar is tempted to cope with the issue of origins, intercultural and intertextual issues. The latter require comparison with multiple traditions: Jewish (Hebrew), Hispanic, Turkish, Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Rumanian. Thus, the study of "simple" Sephardic riddles from the Balkans turns into a complex effort, while the

scholar tends to settle for partial analyses as well as partial conclusions, hoping that the research will eventually be filled in, like a mosaic, by diverse hands.

Our intention in this article is to contribute to this effort by comparing the Sephardic riddles from the Luria collection from Monastir with riddles in the Serbian oral tradition from, some of them from the area of Kosovo and Metohija that is adjacent to Macedonia (Karadžić, 1933 and Bovan, 1980).

### **The Riddle: General Features**

Before considering analogies between Sephardic and Serbian riddles, it is useful to discuss some features of the riddle as a genre.

The oldest examples of riddles come from other texts – ritual texts, myths and epics – in which they appear. As noted by Vladimir N. Toporov, riddles appearing in ancient Indian ritual texts such as the *brahmodya* provide the prototext of what would later become the riddle as a separate folkloric genre (Toporov, 2010b: 188, 190, 201, 213). The process in which the riddle became an independent folkloric genre involves desacralization. Deprived of the ritual context, the riddle ceases being a magical reconstruction of a cosmological order from chaos, becoming instead a secular genre. Although the original cosmological referents have been retained, their function has changed, while the referent of the folkloric riddle could be just about anything from the real, profane world: natural phenomena, humans, animals, plants, household items, tools, etc.

The most famous riddle today, dating from Greek antiquity, is embedded in the myth of Oedipus and Sophocles *Oedipus*. The well-known hero had to confront the Sphinx, which was perceived to be a demon of destruction and death. Oedipus survives by deciphering a riddle that would subsequently become very widespread: "Which creature has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed? Man". The function of this riddle embedded in the Oedipus narrative is lifesaving.<sup>2</sup> Variations of this riddle have survived in numerous and diverse traditions, including Serbian and Sephardic (Luria, 1930: 89). As noted by Alexander, these riddles tend to appear in narrative contexts:

Les genres narratifs les plus répandus comprenant des énigmes ou des devinettes sont les récits comportant une confrontation d'ordre social ou religieux, ou entre hommes et femmes. Une personne de couche sociale défavorisée, issue d'une minorité religieuse ou de sexe féminin aura droit à une récompense d'envergure grâce à sa sagesse et à son intelligence qui se traduiront par sa faculté de résoudre les difficultés de l'énigme (Alexander, 2005-2006: 23, 26).

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<sup>2</sup> Riddles presented in the narrative as being a matter of life or death have been termed by R. Abrahams and A. Dundes as "énigmes de potence" (Alexander, 2005-2006: 23).

In accordance with the above, we might add that mythical characters solving riddles in order to survive and move on to the events that destiny has in store for them are analogous to the male and female protagonists of fairytales (of the type studied by V. Propp, dealing with the passage to adulthood) who are required to perform difficult, sometimes impossible tasks (such as counting the grains of sand on the beach or the leaves in a forest) which they can carry out only with the assistance of magic helpers. Solving "impossible" riddles and performing equally "impossible" tasks are a key element of both types of narratives. However, separating the riddle from such narrative contexts strips it of its magical power, turning it into a construct wielding social and cultural rather than magical power. A step further down the road of desacralization turns the riddle into a social game, a test of knowledge, wit and imagination.

The riddle as a folkloric genre involves encoding and decoding as a sort of intellectual or poetic *verbal game*. Designing and solving a riddle becomes an exercise in poetic and social skill. The game involves abstract logical progression - from referent to metaphor and back. The riddle is essentially similar to the children's game of hide-and-seek: one player hides an object (the referent) in a specific environment (a constructed metaphor), while the other players seek to find and interpret it. In order to "find" the referent hidden in the metaphor, the contending players have to deconstruct the latter, which is like opening a closed space – a locked chest – and to do that one needs to come up with a symbolic key. However, unlike hide-and-seek, the riddle is a purely *verbal game*. Both "hiding" and "seeking" take place in language. This process could be interpreted as a transfer of the game (its rules or code) from one medium to another: from non-verbal to verbal. While the non-verbal game is more suited for children because it involves physical activity of the body, the verbal game is more suited for adults engaging in mental activity, playing with the mind. The function of the adult game is play as both social performance and entertainment. What is amazing is the implicit poetic quality of this verbal game, the constant encoding/decoding of components of the natural and human world by using one of the basic tools of poetic language - metaphor.

There is also a point of contact between riddles and *jokes*. Both are verbal games. Some riddles are based on wittiness, the principle of jokes, rather than metaphor as a principle of poetic discourse. A riddle moving towards the domain of a joke can be found in the following example: "*Quién es más de un hombre de honor? Dos hombres de honor*" (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 242). Also, there is a point of contact with another verbal game: the *tongue twister*. While the tongue twister requires only pronunciation skill, riddles are more complex because they require additional logical and poetic skills. There are, however, riddles that strongly rely on the sound value of language - its "tongue-twisting" potential and the generation of lexemes function as acoustic rather than semantic items.

The text of the riddle appears as a simple or expanded metaphor related to a referent in the real, mental, emotional or imaginary world. The referent could be almost anything: an object, a person, an abstract concept, a state of being, a situation, a relationship, etc. In formal grammatical terms, the structure of the riddle is based on the question-answer pattern. In macro-semantic terms, its structure is based on the relationship between referent and metaphor. However, there may be other rhetorical figures – most often paradox – embedded in the metaphor. The metaphor has a primary function because it determines the macro-structure of the riddle, while the paradox assumes a secondary function that consists in specifying microelements of the metaphor. The following Serbian riddle can serve to illustrate this: *"It lives without a body,/ speaks without a tongue,/cries without a soul,/laughs without joy,/no one sees it, everyone hears it. (Echo)"* (Bovan, 1980: 45, no. 137). The riddle is a sequence of five segments, four of them paradoxes. While the first two refer to physical features - body/life and tongue/speech - the other two refer to subjective states - grief/crying and joy/laughter. Although not a paradox, the last element of the sequence contains a double opposition: no one – everyone and seeing – hearing. The binary structure is repeated either as paradox or opposition embedded in the overall metaphor, thereby establishing the link between the referent (echo) and its personified (anthropomorphic) image. The resulting image of an imaginary, superhuman or magical being is designed to mislead the person solving the riddle, although several clues (speech, crying, laughter with no *body* or *soul*) can guide him/her towards the solution.

The riddle has a consistent binary structure based on the question-answer grammatical pattern. However, it should be noted that some riddles take the form of direct questions, while others appear as statements with an implied question projected by the structural model. However, once the interrogation is reframed as a statement, the riddle can easily turn into a saying or proverb (Alexander 2006-2007: 30-31). We might call such a riddle elliptic because it omits a formal question. Such an example in the Luria corpus is the following: *"Todu ay al mundu. Sólo tres cozes no ay."* The question is implied by simple separation of the first part of the riddle from the second part: *"Capác al mar, milizine a la muerti, iscalere para asuvir a lus sielus"* (Luria 1930: 89). The separation indicated in the written format of the text reflects the interaction of the two participants of the riddle as an oral performance: one person posing the question and another person answering it.<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of communication, the riddle has a *sender*, whose task is to encode or present an already encoded referent available from the storehouse of the oral tradition. The text of the riddle is the *message* structured as a metaphor and formatted as a formal or implicit question. The task of the *receiver* is to decode the metaphor (message), determine the referent, and articulate it in the format of an answer. Providing a solution to the

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander comments: "Ce texte ne sera considéré comme devinette que si le questionneur s'arrête au terme des deux premières lignes et s'attend à une réponse de la part de son audience. Que manque-t-il au monde ? Si la même personne énonce le texte du début à la fin sans s'arrêter, ce texte devient un dicton par excellence" (Alexander, 2006-2007: 31).

riddle clearly requires the active participation of the audience. Therefore, the riddle is an interactive genre involving two distinct participants: the sender, who is always individual, and the receiver, who could be individual or collective (structured competitively: the individual who first participant solves the riddle is the "winner").

### **The Riddle as a Minor Genre on the Periphery of the Sephardic Folkloric System**

Before dealing with the Luria collection of Sephardic riddles from Monastir, there is the question of why so few Sephardic riddles have been collected. Riddles are a minor genre in the Sephardic folkloric system and as such they have attracted minimal attention in contrast to the bulk of attention, both of collectors and scholars, dedicated to major genres such as folktales and folksongs. Furthermore, when comparing two minor genres – proverbs and riddles – we can note that proverbs, unlike riddles, have been widely collected in all Sephardic areas both by "insider" native Judeo-Spanish speakers and "outsider" professional collectors. This suggests that the riddles as a minor genre existed in the Sephardic folklore system, but that the position of this genre in the folkloric system was peripheral, becoming over time even marginal. As indicated by Sánchez Pérez, only 173 Sephardic riddles have been collected to date (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 238).

In other folkloric systems, the position of this genre could be different. In the Serbian tradition, for example, over 5,000 riddles were collected only in Kosovo and Metohija in the 19th and beginning of the 20th c. (Bovan, 1979: 7).

The following section offers comments on 13 riddles from the Luria collection, which were selected because they have analogues in the Serbian tradition.

### **Sephardic and Serbian Riddles**

1. The above mentioned Oedipus riddle appears in the Luria collection – "*La mañane camine cun cuatro pies / la meyudie cun dos,/ la tadri cun tres. (Il ombri)*" (Luria, 1930: 89) – as well as in other Sephardic geographic areas.<sup>4</sup> It is one of only three Sephardic riddles from the collection studied by Sánchez Pérez that has analogues in the Spanish tradition (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 245). It is also present in the Serbian tradition and many other European folklore traditions. Obviously, it is derived from a common ancient Greek source, but mediated by multiple and possibly diverse subsequent sources.

2. The Luria collection contains the following riddle: "*Un pašaru sin ales buló, in un árvul sin rames apuzó. Vieni un ombri sin pies y sin manus lu tomó. (La njevi)*" (Luria, 1930: 89). This Sephardic riddle coincides to a high degree with the Serbian riddle that reads: "*A white*

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of this riddle see Alexander 2006-2007: 21-23.

*bird flew with no wings, sat on an oak with no branches, a king with no hands killed it, a queen with no teeth ate it. (Snow)*" (Karadžić, 1933: 464, no. 420).<sup>5</sup>

The Serbian text provides several specifying details missing in the Sephardic text: the color of the bird (white), the type of tree (oak), the man is "a king", and there is an additional woman described as "a queen".

The same or similar images also appear in Serbian riddles dealing with other referents. For example, the wind "breaks" hills "without hands" and "eats the leaves without teeth" (Karadžić, 1933: 478, no. 713). Also, the sun melting snow is "a bird" devouring the world "without teeth" (Karadžić, 1933: 471, no.551). Related to such imagery is the inverted image in the Serbian expression "the sun with teeth" or biting sun (*zubato sunce*) indicating a day that is sunny but very cold (the English "biting cold" has "teeth" as a connotation: the cold "bites" even though it has no teeth).

This riddle uses two poetic techniques. One is the attribution of anthropomorphic features to natural phenomena such as the sun, wind, and snow. The second one is the deification of such phenomena: snowflakes naturally fly and fall from the sky in winter, the sun melts the snow in spring, the wind blows away dry leaves in fall; but here the snowflakes are presented as flying without wings, the sun as eating without teeth or killing without hands.

Alexander cites a Hebrew version printed in Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, noting that similar images appear in Latin and German (Alexander, 2006-2007: 5-7). Toporov leads us much farther into the past when he indicates that beings flying without wings, eating without teeth, etc., are found in ancient Indian texts (Toporov, 2010a: 212).

In addition, the same images appear in magic charms, both Serbian *basme* – where someone or something sees without eyes, runs without legs, catches something without hands, eats without a mouth – and Bosnian Sephardic *pricantes*. In one such *pricante* we read: "...*Achapilo sin mano, degollilo sin cuchio, englotilo sin paladar...*" (Vidaković-Petrov, 1994: 288-289). The actions of these supernatural beings, demons inhabiting the "other world" are magical and they can be warded off only by charms, verbal constructs believed to be endowed with the power of magic. This again leads us back to the riddle prototypes analyzed by Toporov, i.e. to the ritual context of ancient riddles (Toporov, 2010a and 2010b).

The identification of natural phenomena with "kings" and "queens" exercising supernatural power is explained by their deification. The latter introduce a reference to fairytales where such characters are common. Deification is fairly common in the Serbian tradition in which remnants of the pre-Christian cultural layer subsisted in the later Christian culture. This pre-Christian heritage is also reflected in Serbian "mythological" lyrical songs as well as some ballads, where the sun, moon and stars appear in personified form.

Sánchez Pérez cites a riddle on snow from the Viennese collection she studied:

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<sup>5</sup> English translations of cited Serbian riddles are my own.

"En el aver avolo, sobre la tierra está echada, sobre los árboles asentada, en las manos sudada, en las sobas derretida, en el agua ahogada"; she indicates the latter is found in various Spanish collections (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 247). The difference between the Viennese/Spanish versions and the Monastir/Serbian versions with regard to motifs and their function in the semantic structure suggests that the Viennese riddle might be older due to its affinity with Spanish sources, while the Monastir riddle could be younger due to its affinity with Balkan sources. The snow riddle is interesting not only because it refers to the coexistence of different riddles on the same referent in the Sephardic tradition, which is not at all unusual, but also because it highlights a possible example of folkloric items distinguished by pre- and post-exile sources.

3. The Sephardic riddle referring to thunder reads: "*La bos si senti, la care no si veyi. (Il truenu)*" (Luria, 1930: 89), while the Serbian analogue reads: "*I climb up to the silver clearing,/ And start playing my golden flutes,/ Everyone hears me, nobody sees me*" (Karadžić, 1933: 449, no. 153).

The Sephardic version coincides with the final (third) part of the Serbian riddle on thunder, which is identical to the final part of the above-mentioned Serbian riddle on the *echo*. These two Serbian examples suggest the existence of certain formulas – in this case "everyone hears me, nobody sees me" – that can appear in various riddles with diverse referents that share a common denominator – in this case, sound is a common denominator of both *thunder* and *echo*. Sound is essentially qualified as a phenomenon lacking visual attributes. This can function as a clue to the person solving the riddle by relying on the corpus of riddles in his/her tradition.

The Serbian riddle, however, expands the metaphor by using both personification and deification: thunder appears as an invisible deity rising to a plateau in the sky and playing musical instruments. The description of the place and instruments (made of silver and gold) suggest the supernatural world, while the image of thunder as a musician with magic powers is distantly reminiscent of Orpheus.

In contrast to the Serbian text, the Sephardic one is a metaphor reduced to essential sound-visual elements (hearing the voice, not seeing the face), a personification lacking signs of deification.

4. The Sephardic text referring to the sky reads: "*In un tasín ay muchas alviyanes y une mansane. (Il sielu)*" (Luria, 1930: 90), while the Serbian examples read: "*A pan full of golden pits*" (Karadžić, 1933: 466, no. 451) or "cakes" (Bovan 1980: 43, no. 124).

While the Sephardic version uses the domestic word *tasín*, Serbian versions use the word *tepsija*, borrowed from the Turkish language. *Tepsija*, denoting a round metal baking pan, is used in Serbian colloquial speech. There is even a Serbian expression identifying the shining sun with the *tepsija*. However, there are other Serbian riddles with the same referent



(the sky) resorting to quite different metaphors. The image of the sky can be *an endless field with uncountable sheep* (a shepherd image implying the concept of the unlimited: *endless space, uncountable stars*); *a single roll of linen covering the whole earth* (a textile image associated with clothing, implying the idea of continuity, unity and vastness)<sup>6</sup>; *a boy spilling golden apples from a sack in the darkness* (a dynamic image implying action, identifying stars with apples); *a field fastened with nails* (Bovan, 1980: 43, no. 126; 42, no. 119; 43, no. 127; and 43, no. 125). The Sephardic version coincides only with the Serbian version featuring the "pan" image. The only difference is that instead of "golden" pits (gold again indicating the supernatural) or cakes, the Sephardic version mentions hazelnuts (stars) and one apple (the Morning Star). A common trait of all cited riddles regarding the sky is that they refer to the night sky studded with stars. A specific trait of the "pan" image is the culinary connotation. By implication, the creator of the firmament appears as a cosmic cook, while celestial bodies are identified as the fruits of nature. This in turn reminds us of the well-known idea of Levi-Strauss that cooking itself is a metaphor of culture, of processing the raw into the cooked.

The three previous examples refer to natural and cosmological referents that have preserved ties to the ancient sources of riddles, especially ritual texts. As we have seen, Sephardic and Serbian riddles dealing with such referents – snow, thunder, and sky – feature close parallelism. Considering this, it is surprising that in the case of a key cosmological element – the sun – such parallelisms are missing.

5. The statistical representation of semantically related referents – such as household items, agricultural instruments, human values, domestic and other animals, plants, etc. - in a given corpus could reflect the importance of a certain group of referents in the life of a particular social, ethnic or religious group. For example, in the Serbian rural environment, in which riddles have been recorded, there are numerous references to plants, especially those cultivated by farmers. References to tools associated with agricultural tasks are also numerous. Such referents would presumably appear less frequently in riddles pertaining to a group living in an urban setting such as the Balkan Sephardim. The Luria corpus confirms this as it includes only two references to plants and none to agricultural tools.

One of them is the pomegranate (*la mangrana*) described in the following riddle: "*Une coze, coze muy maraviyoze / Doz mil, trez mil, capacuti*" (Luria, 1930: 88). The introductory line is a formula found in other riddles as well. The pomegranate as a riddle referent is not surprising considering the specifically Jewish connotations of this fruit. The latter is not only appreciated for its beauty and taste, but is in addition imbued with symbolism derived from Biblical sources and assuming mystical connotations.<sup>7</sup> The pomegranate symbolizing the

<sup>6</sup> This image is reminiscent of the sky as a scroll found in the Torah. However, the "roll" of linen lacks important connotations (writing, Holy text, Torah) associated with the "scroll".

<sup>7</sup> Vid. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomegranate#Judaism> Consulted 4 december 2015

Jewish nation and the Knesset appears in other genres as well (the *complas de las frutas*, for example).

While the pomegranate illustrates the interpretation of nature in terms of culture, there are Sephardic riddles in collections other than Luria's that illustrate the opposite - the interpretation of culture in terms of nature. One such example is a riddle referring to the Torah: "*Alto, alto como el pino,/ minudo, minudo como el komino,/ amargo, amargo como la fiel,/ dulce, dulce como la miel*. The attribute *dulce como la miel*" is derived from the *Song of Songs* (Alexander, 2006-2007: 19-20), but is also found in other Biblical texts such as Ezekiel (3:1, 2, 3), where the book (*Torah*) assumes the image of «food» for the spirit rather than for the body. The prophet is offered "to eat" the book which is "as sweet as honey" (Vidaković-Petrov, 2010: 10) and this image of the *Torah* appears not only in riddles, as mentioned above, but also in children's folklore (Vidaković-Petrov, 2010: 10 -11).

Although the corpus of Serbian riddles features numerous plant referents, this particular fruit, the pomegranate, is missing. This is because it is a typically Mediterranean fruit not grown in the Balkan hinterland. The Serbian plant repertoire reflects the geography and climate of the hinterland: oak, wheat, pumpkins, cherries, peppers, onions, peas, cabbage, potatoes, corn, garlic, grapes, walnuts, etc. The closest fruit to the pomegranate – regarding form, color and multitude of seeds - is the dog rose or rose hip. The latter is used traditionally in the form of a medicinal drink (herbal tea), but is void of any specific cultural symbolism in the Serbian tradition. This shows how two factors, social/economic environment and cultural heritage, influence the choice of referents appearing in riddles.

While it is not surprising that Sephardic folklore has absorbed images from Biblical sources, Biblical references in Serbian riddles are not common. There is one peculiar example we will cite, although it has no connection with the Sephardic riddles considered in this article. It is a Serbian riddle referring to the *Exodus* which reads: "*Golden pillars divided the water / where hunters were chasing a hare, / the hare escaped, the hunters perished*". The solution to the riddles is: "*When Moses, fleeing from the pharaoh, crossed the sea, while the pharaoh and his soldiers perished in it*" (Karadžić, 1933: 447, no. 116). The riddle transposes the relationship between the protagonists of the key episode of *Exodus* into the register of hunting (hunters-hare). However, the "golden pillars" that "divided the water" provide a clue to the referent in the Biblical source. Transpositions of this sort are common in riddles. What is uncommon is the choice of referent. Namely, although the *Old Testament* is part of the Christian *Bible*, Christians tend to give precedence to the *New Testament*. The Crossing of the Red Sea is a key event for the Jews, but less so for the Christians, especially Serbian Orthodox Christian peasants. This suggests that the riddle might have originated in an environment associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, from where it could have entered into the oral tradition. Its presence in the oral tradition could be due to the basic idea of the event – persecution of the powerless by the powerful and survival of the former due to divine intervention – that converged with the feelings of Serbian peasants subjected to violence and

persecution by the local Ottoman authorities. When all seems to be lost, the only hope is divine protection from “the hunters”.

6. The other plant referent found in the Luria collection is the walnut: *"In une udá ay cuatro ladronis. (La mues)"* (Luria, 1930: 90). In the Serbian corpus there are multiple and diverse riddles referring to this popular nut. Some are dissimilar to the Sephardic one: *"Taller than a horse, / smaller than a mouse, / more bitter than bile, / but sweeter than honey"* (Bovan, 1980: 75, no. 305); or its variant: *"Bitter as bile, / sweet as sugar"* (Bovan, 1980: 75, no. 304). These two Serbian texts refer to the taste of the walnut. Three other Serbian texts, similar to the Sephardic one, deal with the visual image of the walnut rather than its taste. What is common to Sephardic and these Serbian riddles is the mention of four persons - brothers, soldiers, or objects (such as doors) referring to sections of the fruit inside the shell: *"Four brothers in a single pair of trousers"*, *"Four brothers under a single cap"*, and *"Four soldiers in a room, / windowless, but with four doors"* (Bovan, 1980: 74-75, no. 300, 301, 303). The latter Serbian riddles and the Sephardic one are variants of the same image of the walnut as consisting of four equal parts in a common enclosure. While the brothers are related by kinship, the thieves and soldiers are equal as members of the same profession. In the Serbian example featuring four brothers, the shell of the walnut is associated with clothing items (trousers, cap), suggesting a high degree of closeness (kinship, ties involving body), while in the thieves and soldiers examples the shell is perceived as an enclosed space – a room or a house – suggesting a lower degree of closeness (ties involving common intent or activity).

7. The Sephardic corpus includes few plants and domestic animals. One of the latter is the rooster: *"Curone tieni, rey no es, ore no tiene, ya savi cuantes son. (Il gayu)"* (Luria, 1930: 89). This riddle features a double paradox with inverted terms (has an attribute referring to a king, but is not a king versus does not have a clock, but can tell time). The Serbian analogue reads: *"Our count drinks water, a banner fluttering over his head; he has a crown, but is not a king; he has a sabre, but is not a soldier"* (Bovan, 1980: 112, no. 512), which also features a double paradox, but with no inversion of terms (the second one is only an additional variation of the first one). The two texts coincide in the first visual attribute of the rooster. However, the Sephardic text has a clue embedded in the second paradox (the motif of telling time), complementing the visual attribute and presenting a more specific image of the rooster.

8. The Sephardic *"Doz irmanus caminado istán y no se veyin. (Luz ojus)"* (Luria, 1930: 90) is analogous to the Serbian *"Born as twin brothers, they walk for days and nights never touching one another."*<sup>8</sup> (Karadžić, 1933: 467, no. 481). The motif of brothers appearing in the above-mentioned riddle on the walnut (Serbian version) appears again in this riddle referring to the eyes. Here we have two rather than four brothers: they are equal, akin and

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<sup>8</sup> "Rodise se dva brata jednaka, i dan i noc hodase, a jedan drugog ne takose."

even identical (*twins* in the Serbian text). In both Sephardic and Serbian versions they walk together, the long walk stressed in the Serbian text by the temporal adverbial phrase *for days and nights*. In both cases the paradox rests on the statement that they fail to *see* each other (Sephardic) or *touch* one another (Serbian). Both statements are true as eyes are positioned in a way that does not allow them to either see or touch one another. However, while the visual reference tends to elucidate the riddle, the tactile reference tends to further obscure it.

9. Brothers appear for the third time in the Sephardic "*Cuatro irmanicuz acurriendu, luz dos chicus adilantri, luz dos grandiz atrás. Todus cuatro acurriendu, u luz grandiz a lus chicus no luz aferren (Luz carrus di l'arabá)*" (Luria, 1930: 88-89) and Serbian "*Four brothers running down the road can't catch up with one another*"<sup>9</sup> (Karadžić, 1933: 476, no. 663). This time the brothers represent inanimate objects – wheels – that are basically identical and akin (mutually related), while the cart - a man-made object used in everyday agricultural and other chores – appears as a unifying factor, something like a family the brothers are part of. The verb used here (to run) can refer to the movement of both people and inanimate objects such as vehicles. The number of parts (four), their size (small/big) and position (front/rear and parallel) are clues to the solution of the riddle.

The collection of Sephardic riddles studied by Sánchez Pérez includes one with the same referent: "*Son cuatro hermanas prestosas que el día entero coren y no se alcanzan. ¿Cuálas son? (Las ruedas de el caro)*" (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 243). The riddle features four sisters rather than brothers, possibly because the word "ruedas" is of feminine grammatical gender (in contrast to the Serbian word "točkovi" that is masculine). The preference for sisters rather than brothers could be a case of adaptation to the grammatical requirements of the language. More interesting is an important comment by Sánchez Pérez – that the editor indicated that several riddles, including this one, had been translated from the Rumanian language (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 251). All things considered, this is an instance indicating the influence of the Balkan oral tradition on the Sephardic one. However, if, in the 1880s, the Sephardic riddle on the wheels of a cart was a translation from Rumanian, by the time Luria collected riddles from illiterate informants in Monastir (1927), it had been integrated into the Sephardic oral tradition of Macedonia. The fact that the Monastir version features brothers instead of sisters (coinciding in this respect with its Serbian analogue) is due to the denotation of the referent as "*Lus carrus di l'arabá*" rather than "*Las ruedas de el caro*".

10. The Sephardic "*In une haraná, il hamór entre, la code no entre. (La cuchare)*" (Luria, 1930: 90) is analogous to the Serbian "*I led a horse carrying a burden into the mill, the horse and the burden went in, his tail could not.*" (Bovan, 1980: 187, no. 952). Here we have the identification of an inanimate object - a spoon used for eating - with an animal, (donkey or horse). The first element of the image pertains to the form and function of the object: one

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<sup>9</sup> "Cetiri brata putem tree, a jedan drugog ne moze da stigne (Točkovi)".

rounded part carries food (a donkey carrying a burden), while the other part, thin and elongated (the donkey's tail) is used to hold and move the spoon; the second element is the enclosed space into which the object/animal is introduced: the mouth/mill; the third is the act of entering, a dynamic motif complementing the two previously indicated static motifs. In this example there is no paradox, but the *tail* remaining *outside* the *mill* (the hand of the spoon remaining outside the mouth) is a clue to the solution of the riddle.

11. The Sephardic "*Provi abaše, ricu asuvi. (La cuvá d'ague)*" (Luria, 1930: 90) is parallel in to the Serbian "*It enters dry, exits wet.*" (Bovan, 1980: 189, no. 969). Both have a binary structure involving multiple oppositions. The Sephardic text refers to one set of attributes: vertical movement (down/up) and social status (poor - empty/rich - full). The Serbian refers to another set: unspecified movement referring to a closed space (enter - inside/exit - outside) and the association with water (dry/wet) that is a clue to the solution of the riddle.

Although this riddle is not featured in the collection studied by Sánchez Pérez, she quotes several Sephardic versions published by other authors - Galante, Armistead and Silverman, Milwitzky – collected in Greece, Turkey and Istanbul respectively, as well as a Castilian version (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 249-250). All of these use two sets of motifs: vertical movement (down/up) and anthropomorphic expressions of subjective mood (laughing/crying): "*Abassa riendo y subi llorando*". This simple riddle is distributed in Spain, the Balkans and the Sephardic area, so it is difficult to discuss its origin. We can only comment on the selection from among the various attributes of the referent (regarding form, composition, structure, number, position, movement, state, status, etc.) and the common technique of presenting inanimate objects in anthropomorphic images. As shown above, different selections generate various images (signifiers) identified with a single referent (signified). Variations appear in the same tradition (riddles on the pail in the Sephardic corpus, riddles on the sky in the Serbian corpus) and in two or more traditions.

12. The Sephardic "*Um pretu 'stá inclavadu a la foye. Sólu la cavese si la veyi. (Il clavu)*" (Luria, 1930: 90) is similar to the Serbian "*They hit me on the head, thrust in my tail and left me there.*" (Karadžić, 1933: 451, no. 189). The Serbian text hides the referent, an inanimate object, in the image of an animal with a head and a tail. The identity of the referent in the Serbian text, specified by the act of being *hit* on the *head* and its *tail* thrust into a surface, provides an indirect clue to the solution of the riddle, while the word *inclavadu* in the Sephardic text has the clue embedded in it. Animation is stressed in the Serbian text by the use of the grammatical first person rather than the third person. The collection studied by Sánchez Pérez features a similar version: "*El cuerpo me meten en la casz y la cabeza me dešan afuera. ¿Quién so yo? (El clavo)*". She also comments on the fact that she has found no Spanish analogues (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 247). Disimilarities with Spanish riddles, on one

hand, and similarities with the Serbian version, on the other, suggest that this is another case of Balkan influence on the Sephardic oral tradition.

13. The Sephardic *"Di la muntañe abašu lo eches, no si arrompi. (Il papel)"* (Luria, 1930: 88) is analogous to the Serbian *"Throw it from the sky – it won't break, leave it in the water, it will"*<sup>10</sup> (Bovan, 1980: 257, no. 1362). The Serbian text combines three oppositions: mountain/water, throw/immerse, remain whole/break. This example is associated with numerous riddles in the Serbian tradition referring to writing, instruments for writing, letters and books. It is interesting to note that the pencil is described as an object that "speaks without a mouth" and "without a tongue" (Bovan, 1980: 161, no. 795) that is analogous to the Sephardic riddle in the collection studied by Sánchez Pérez: *"Yo no so bivo y con todo esto puedo hablar con el cercano y ležano. ¿Quién so? (La péndola)"* (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 244). An interesting feature of the oral tradition – Serbian as well as Spanish – is that *writing* (written communication) is rendered in the image of *speaking* (oral communication). *Speaking* stands for communication in general, regardless of whether it is oral or written, so one can *speak* with another person located in a distant place. In other words, written communication is merely an extension of oral communication that enjoys precedence. However, in the Serbian tradition writing is metaphorically presented also in the image of an agricultural task: sowing and reaping (*"I sowed without a plow,/ Reaped without a sickle"*). This image opens the door to another very interesting issue – the construction and function of metaphors in folkloric texts, more specifically, how writing is represented in texts defined by oral transmission, but also how the oral tradition is connected with the written tradition.

### Concluding remarks

As shown above, 13 of the 34 riddles from the Luria collection have analogues in the Serbian tradition, which amounts to slightly less than half. The referents that we have found no analogues for are: *luz bicuz di la vague, il sol, la fuenti, la cuchare di dulstsi, il filu, una pirsona sin amigus, luz irmanus, la red, il guevu, la mizade, il sigarru, il oju, la furmige, la varande, il barridor al fornu, la vide, la lus*. Perhaps the most important one among them is the sun. The setting sun is described as an object falling into the sea, but not getting wet. As pointed out by Alexander, this riddle appears in Judeo-Spanish collections (Luria, Milwitzki, Galante) as well as Hispanic sources since the Middle Ages (Alexander, 2006-2007: 4-5). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that no analogues were found in the Serbian tradition.

The main question our research entails is how to explain the correspondence of 13 Judeo-Spanish riddles collected in Monastir with Serbian riddles. The main complication arises from the fact that Balkan culture, despite the variety of languages and cultural traditions, involves a lot of communication overriding linguistic, ethnic and religious barriers.

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<sup>10</sup> Pusti ga od nebo – ne lomi se, ostavi ga u vodu – slomi se. (Hartija)

A factor further complicating research is the reliance of the Balkan and European tradition on the ancient Indo-European heritage. I will offer only one example, the Sephardic riddle in the collection studied by Sánchez Pérez referring: "*Tengo un leño con 12 ramas y en cada rama hay 4 culebrias y en cada culebra hay 7 huevos*" (*El año, los meses, las semanas y los días*) (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 242). Analogous riddles are found in Peninsular sources (Sánchez Pérez, 2013: 248), so one might assume the Sephardic riddle is of Spanish provenance. However, the publisher of the Sephardic riddle stated clearly that this riddle is a translation from Rumanian that would indicate direct Rumanian influence. The fact that there is an analogous Serbian riddle suggests the latter could be part of the pan-Balkan tradition. In addition, the Russian scholar Toporov, cited in the first part of this article, offers the example of an analogous Russian riddle that he traces back to ancient Indian *Vedas*, the oldest layer of Sanskrit literature (Toporov, 2010a: 186-187). This example, as well as the Sphinx riddle, suggests that the issue of the "origin" of folkloric items embedded in the deepest layers of oral tradition could be a very complex one and that scholars should be aware of the limited range of the specific tools at their disposal.

Methodologically speaking, the analysis of Sephardic riddles from the Luria collection requires multiple comparisons: not only with riddles from Jewish and Hispanic sources, but also with those from Balkan traditions other than Serbian, especially Turkish and Greek, and further on into the common ancient heritage deposited in Mediterranean culture. Without such a comprehensive methodological approach, it is impossible to determine which riddles have entered the Sephardic tradition from each of the multiple possible sources, which come from common sources, and which traditions have functioned as mediators. Considerations of some general aspects of the riddle as a genre and comparisons of the Luria corpus with riddles from the Serbian tradition are only a partial contribution to the study of Sephardic riddles, a neglected minor genre - seemingly simple, but involving complex and interesting aspects of folkloric studies.

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