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CONTENTS   FROM THE EDITOR

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CRITICAL ESSAYS   BOOK REVIEWS

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

IDENTITY REDEFINITION THROUGH THE OVERCOMING OF THE CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN M.G. VASSANJI'S *THE MAGIC OF SAIDA*

Monica Colt, PhD
(Bucharest, ROMANIA)

Correspondence should be addressed to: monicacolt@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this paper I examine some of the ways in which an immigrant's identity construction is achieved by the acceptance and overcoming of the challenges brought about by the process of adjustment to new socio-cultural contexts. To capture the relevant aspects of this process, I explore the work of a Canadian author, M.G.Vassanji, whose works of fiction explore the identity trajectory of his immigrant characters. In order to highlight the character's intense feelings that modify their attitudes and behavior, I have chosen M.G.Vassanji's 2012 novel The Magic of Saida*, in which we follow the identity trajectory of the Indian-African Kamal Punja, now a successful doctor in Edmonton, Canada, as he returns to Kilwa, the African city of his childhood, where he hopes to find answers to harrowing questions and to be reunited with his childhood sweetheart, the eponymous Saida.*

Our sense of identity centers on self-knowledge, based not only the question "Who am I?" but also the process of self mirroring, a reference to what Charles Horton Cooley, the well-known American sociologist, named the "looking-glass self" in the process of symbolic interaction: whether I am what I think I am, what the others think I am or what I imagine the others think about me (136-173). Any discussion of identity also foregrounds the role of the "significant others," generally our immediate circle of family and friends, and "generalized others" or the common social view (Mead, (160-161; 90). In Vassanji's story, post-1950s African society, itself colored by strong post-colonial cultural influences, primarily British and German, but also Indian, Arabic and African, provides the context in which Kamal's route to self-definition starts along the coordinates of a "space of questions" (Taylor 34). In this journey, as in Vassanji's other works, we can identify Canada as a point of mature reflection, and East Africa as a point of both departure and return to the familiar "webs of interlocution" (36) that give the character a unique opportunity to develop a deep understanding both of his own self and of the Other.

Keywords: socio-cultural identity; post-colonial; Canadian literature.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will try to show that the immigrant character's identity construction is achieved through accepting and overcoming the challenges which come from the process of adjustment to new socio-cultural contexts. I propose an original way of highlighting the depth of this process based on a literary text. The immigrants' quest for identity and their adaptation to a new culture is a recurrent theme in literature, also approached by other South-Asian writers, such as: V. S. Naipaul (the novels *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*), Neil Bissoondath (*A Casual Brutality, The Worlds Within Her*), Bharati Mukherjee (the novel *Jasmine* and the short story "A Wife's Story" in *The Middleman, and Other Stories*), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (the novel *Queen of Dreams* and "Meeting Mrinal" the story in the collection *Arranged Marriage*) or Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's (In *Search of Love and Beauty, Poet and Dancer*), to enumerate a few. In *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity,*

and the Languages of American Literature, editor Werner Sollors gathered together 28 essays by different scholars on various aspects of transnationalism, acculturation, and identity.

In my analysis I will explore M. G. Vassanji's 2012 novel *The Magic of Saida* which illustrates the depth of identity creation correlated with the topic of immigration. As in Vassanji's other fictional works, in this novel, the Canadian multicultural context with its "rise and fall" in the accommodation of diversity (Kymlicka 32) shows the role of the values underlying cultural groups following immigration. This occurs on a number of levels: ethnic, social, historical and political. All these layers are fundamentally necessary to portray Kamal Punja's experience, in order to understand the dynamics of his inner changes in the East-African and Canadian cultural contexts and to highlight how his quest for self definition and self knowledge is constructed through the references to a defining community (Taylor 36).The issue of immigration as an ever-present phenomenon in today's world connects the topic to the author of the book and brings along the question: who is the author?

WHO IS THE AUTHOR?

M. G. Vassanji is a prestigious Canadian author with a multicultural background whose personal story started in Kenya, where he was born. His personal imprint, correlated with his emotional experience, has certainly influenced his fiction. Thus, the source of the author's creativity connects in a unique way its cultural roots with the adoptive country and the transcultural experience of this author whose works are well received in Canada and beyond. His literary works have been widely translated from English, not only into Swahili and Hindi, but also into Japanese, French, Portuguese, Spanish and recently Romanian. Vassanji writes about Canadian East African Indians whose traditions and values he knows from the inside. In most of his novels and short stories, the readers can witness fascinating immigrant fictional stories of strong characters in vivid socio-cultural contexts which overlap the geography of Toronto, Don Mills, Dar es Salaam or Kilwa. Thus, the Canadian (*No New Land*), the American (*Amriika*) or even the Indian (*The Assassin's Song*[1]) settings of his fictional works form a bridge between the North-American space and Tanzania, Kenya or India.

The author's academic studies in the USA, followed by his decision to make Canada his home, enlarge the author's perspective with the experience of these societies in which the politics of multiculturalism shape the historical multiculturality. Likewise, the tonality of his works, that of an author formed in the years of Kenya's and Tanzania's independence, is reflected by his attention to the historical detail without taking sides, to the characters' interdependencies and to their role in the reconstruction of the past. The author's closeness to Tanzania and India is illustrated by his non-fiction, evoking Vassanji's familiar cultural spaces and the subtle change of the people in the historical perspective. This is why his latest book, *And Home Was Kariakoo: a Memoir of East Africa* (Doubleday Canada, 2014) should be read correlated with Vassanji's other non-fictional book *A Place Within: Rediscovering India*, published in 2008, which chronologically marks a starting point in the author's return to the homeland of his ancestors. As Vassanji explains referring to India, the land of his ancestors, "I grew up in Dar es Salaam, on the coast of East Africa; the memory and the sight of that city, of that continent, evoke in me a deep nostalgia and love of place. India, on the other hand, seemed to do something to the soul; give it a certain ease, a sense of homecoming, quite another kind of nostalgia" (Vassanji, 2008: X). Vassanji's important contribution in highlighting the cultural differences and the adaptation effort can be found in almost all his literary work. *The Magic of Saida* is Vassanji's seventh novel in which the past and the present intermingle along the main character's complex path to self-knowledge.

THE MAGIC OF SAIDA – THE STORY LINE

The novel offers the mediated perspective of the third person narrative intermingling the past and the present through the voice of Martin Kigoma, "an African publisher" who is seeking stories "from Oyster Bay to Kariakoo" (Vassanji, 2013: 2) and who appears fascinated by the intriguing story of a man with African appearance, Indian name and Canadian dwelling place (4), Kamal Punja. Kigoma's narration unfolds Kamal Punja's life story as told from his hospital bed. Beginning a long time before, in the African city of Kilwa, the story is outlined against a magic space as the first question Kamal asks Martin in "his sickbed" (4) is: "Do you believe in magic?" (4) With a twinge of envy, the narrator also introduces the readers to what at first sight seems to be the model of success in Canada for an Indian East African: an emigrated doctor who is the co-owner of three successful clinics, a husband, and father of two talented children.

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[1] *The Assassin's Song* was shortlisted for the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Prize, the Writers Trust Award and India's Crossword Prize.

Kamal Punja returns to his childhood city of Kilwa (Tanzania) after 35 years of absence, and in doing so connects with his memories and rekindles his deep feelings for the eponymous Saida, his teenage love to whom he had promised to return. The analysis of Kamal's identity formation reveals the conflicting aspects of his ethnic belonging and his cultural heritage in different life stages: his childhood in Kilwa, his adolescent years in Dar es Salaam, his academic studies in Uganda and then his adult life in Canada. We learn of his still unanswered questions concerning his Indian father, whom he never knew, and about his Tanzanian mother, of whom he lost track after her decision to send him to his father's family, far from the people and the places in Kilwa, to which he felt attached; these have become strong incentives for Kamal's return to Africa.

The story unveils the inner turmoil and the tensions of an assertive man still bearing the traces of unconfirmed promises and painful wounds. Back in Africa, in the eyes of his peers he is both a winner and an Indian-African who had the chance of gaining success as a doctor in Canadian society. The character's complexity reveals that distinctive beauty of the human nature which is enriched by all experiences, whether good or bad. His attempts to acquire knowledge about his ancestry and about Saida are endowed with multiple meanings, which are gradually revealed. The reader learns about the cultural roots that ground Kamal in Africa, and comes to understand their values and meanings. Starting from the title and the very first chapters, the author's proposition is that by the end of the novel the reader will have seen magic from a totally different angle.

On a personal level, every reader can identify with the intensity of the feelings portrayed, but the literary text goes beyond this level. In order to position Kamal's identity struggle more accurately, Vassanji's literary strategy is to develop three intertwined plans. The central perspective is the story of the person who is born in Kilwa; the larger perspective accentuates the role of their ethnic group; and the third level is the Canadian multicultural perspective. In this way the author aims to answer most of the identity-related questions, thus closing the cycle of the character's identity as it becomes accessible to different categories of audience.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Self-knowledge brings to the fore not only the question "Who am I?" but also self-mirroring, a reference to what Charles Horton Cooley, the well-known American sociologist, named the "looking-glass" self in the process of symbolic interaction, whether I am what I think I am, what the others think I am or what I imagine

the others think about me (136-173). The interrogative dimension multiplied each time by the responses to the questions deepens the topic, mainly because it is situated in a horizon rather than a fixed position. The unfolding plans of the novel reveal Kamal's gradual construction of the self according to Cooley's concept of the "looking-glass," emphasizing the way Kamal perceives himself; the self reflected in the others' mirror in Martin Kigoma's retelling of the story; and the readers' interpretation of Africa, or what they imagine that others think of Africa. Vassanji's writing technique not only gives us fascinating insights into this process of self-definition, but also brings to life a fictional world that is full of color and shadows, in which the magic connects the people and the places; the traditions reflect a changing reality enriching the characters' choices, and the past and the present intermingle in a narrative that is strongly evocative.

The analytical framing of the character's identity formation brings into question the role of what George Herbert Mead, one of the founders of socio-psychology, refers to as "significant others" (160-161) and "generalized others."[2.] (90). In Mead's terms, Kamal's family members and a few representative people from Kamal's neighborhood could be identified as "significant others" because they play an important role in the character's shaping of his sense of self in the early stages of his identity formation. The attitudes and opinions of Kamal's mother, his childhood friend Saida, and the poet Mzee Omari all feature as reflections in a mirror resulting in the molding of his self-awareness and self-image.

Kamal's social circle, his relations with the local community members and how he deals with the community's values, attitudes and expectations are indicative of Mead's "generalized others" in the process of identity formation. By applying Mead's concept of "generalized others," my analysis follows the character's socialization in the cultural groups of origin which contributes to attaining self-knowledge from the perspective of the "other,"[3] i.e. what one is not, by

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[2] Mead's definition of the "generalized other" emphasizes the role of the common social view: "The very universality and impersonality of thought and reason is from the behavioristic standpoint the result of the given individual taking the attitudes of others toward himself, and of his finally crystallizing all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called that of the "generalized other." (90)

[3] Bill Ashcroft defines "the other" in his book *Post-Colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*. "In general terms, the 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others

projecting the group's common expectations about his actions or even thoughts:

> The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. (138)

This process of self formation and self integration has a dual dimension, according to which the "me" (the social dimension of the self) aims to counter the effects of the "I," where the "I" "is the response of the individual to the attitude of the community as this appears in his own experience. [...] The "I" appears in our experience in memory." (196)

At the same time, the author's references to the geography and history of Tanzania or Canada acquire relevance in the readers' understanding of the characters' development. This realistic streak of the novel becomes evident in the author's outlining of Tanzanian and Canadian socio-cultural contexts.

Therefore, I find it relevant to make a few references to the findings of the World Values Survey[4] and Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions which offer an image of the tendencies in Canada and Tanzania based on the sociological interpretations. It is important to underline that their models apply to cultural groups, as they are meant to describe, and not necessarily to explain, a type of individual behavior. Thus, through a complex interdisciplinary analysis of peoples' values and beliefs in their dynamic at the global level, we can point out the differences between these two cultural contexts.

According to World Values Survey, this dynamic is seen along two dimensions: traditional values versus secular-rational values; and survival values versus self-expression values.[5] Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel's cultural

maps[6] show that Canada, among other countries, has a tendency towards self-expression values whereas Tanzania and other African countries are oriented towards traditional values and survival values. Likewise, in Hofstede's vision (and his collaborators) the cultural profile of a country can be described through six dimensions. Each cultural dimension has a score between 0 and 100 used for comparison between two or more countries or cultures. For Canada and Tanzania this cultural profile shows four important differences:

Individualism vs. collectivism (is expressed on a scale where 0 defines a collective society and 100 an individualistic society). There is a clear difference between the two countries along this cultural dimension. Canada has a score of 80 which indicates a tendency towards individualism, emphasizing individual rights. By comparison, Tanzania has a score of 25 which indicates a collectivist profile, showing that individual behavior is influenced by the position in the group and people's tendency to judge other people based on their belonging to the cultural groups (110). This difference is very important in terms of self-image related to the difference between "I" and "We."

Power Distance (expressed on a scale where 0 defines a society with a large distribution of power and 100 a society where power is very concentrated and not distributed). This dimension is indicative of how these two countries deal with inequality. Canada has a score of 39 on this dimension, indicating a high distribution of power marked by the interdependence between the members and focused on the value of egalitarianism. By comparison, Tanzania's score of 70 describes a society where hierarchy is accepted without justification, which is specific to societies where the power is highly concentrated (74).

Indulgence (This dimension analyzes how a society deals with free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun, where 0 defines a society with a repressive style and 100, a society with an indulgent style). On this dimension, Canadian culture with its score of 68 is oriented towards indulgence with a positive attitude regarding its members' desire of enjoying life. By comparison, Tanzania has a low score (38) showing a more controlled style, defining a more restraining way to educate children for socialization (297).

Masculinity (where a 0 score describes a feminine society in which the important values are caring for others and quality of life and 100 indicates a masculine

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is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world" (154-155). The definition (and the distinction) of the other/ Other in psychoanalytical, post-colonial and sociological theories cover a large range of aspects. In this paper the term is correlated with Mead's sociological use of the concept.

[4] The World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org) is a global network of social scientists studying changing values and their impact on social and political life, led by an international team of scholars, with the WVS association and secretariat headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden.

[5] Self expression values emphasize increasing tolerance towards foreigners. Traditional values emphasize the role of religion, family ties, and respect for authority. Survival values are correlated with safety and reduced tolerance.

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[6] World Values Survey.

society driven by competition, achievement and success). Tanzania, with a score of 40, is described as a rather feminine society, which tends to value cooperation and modesty. By comparison, Canada has a score of 52 on this dimension, which describes a moderate masculine society (157).

The other two cultural dimensions show an almost similar positioning of Canadian and Tanzanian cultures:

Uncertainty Avoidance (where 0 means not avoiding and 100 represents a strong avoidance of uncertainty). This cultural dimension analyzes the way in which the members of a culture attempt to overcome the threat of the unknown by creating certain beliefs and institutions. The scores on this cultural dimension show that Canada (48) and Tanzania (50) tend to accept the uncertainty of the future and the unknown events (209).

Long-Term Orientation (a 0 score means short term orientation and a 100 score represents a long-term orientation). Comparing the result on this cultural dimension we can identify an almost similar positioning of Canada (36) and Tanzania (34), specific to normative societies which show a great respect for traditions (255).

KAMAL PUNJA'S ROOTS

The narrative line of Kamal's life and identity story starts in Kilwa, the African town "whose recorded history and culture go back a thousand year and more" (Vassanji, 2013: 6). In this meaningful space, the archetypal seeds shaping Kamal's identity are closely related to a mosaic of cultural factors deriving from the African and Indian tradition and the influence of the German and British colonists who are deftly presented by the narrator with reference to the local groups' reaction of resistance (164). Thus, Kamal's childhood and teenage formation have become entangled in a complex network of cultural influences. As a boy, Kamal was called a "half-breed" (6) or "an Asian African. A *chotara*" (22), "a mixed blood" (54) because he was not only the son of Hamida, an African woman, but also of Amin Punja, an Indian doctor who left his family when Kamal was four. The perception of the difference is suggestive of the ethnic groups' clear delineation within the community, whose texture itself was a blend of cultures and ethnic groups, the role of the phrase "half breed" being mainly of emphasizing the difference.

His mother, Bi Hamida, and the local community offer him the opportunity to know his roots through the stories and the references to his ancestry, which are often presented selectively or shrouded in mystery. Thus, Kamal's tendency to explore and test new directions of life has been nourished by his mother and their community's semi-transparency with regard to his

cultural roots and to his parentage. Every now and then Hamida's stories disclose certain family aspects which balance the interplay between young Kamal's sense of self and his image of the family and community of origin. His mother maintains a hesitant silence about her family which seems to be related to the yet persistent feeling of "pain and humiliation" (28) of being traded as slaves in the not too distant past. She feels more confident when she speaks of Kamal's father: "'Your father came from seafaring merchants,' Mama said proudly. *Masultani, mabalozi, waarabu!* They were sultans, ambassadors, and nobility, and he did not have the heart to call her exaggeration. Perhaps it was her eyes that betrayed her, that quick glance, that shot away." (26) Hamida wants her son to take pride of his paternal ancestry, telling him the story of his great-grandfather's success, the Gujarati Indian Punja Devraj who came to Zanzibar as a trader during Colonial times (129) and then married and came to Kilwa (26) where he had the reputation of "a lion of a man" (38) as Mzee Omari, the local poet called him.

In the child's imagination, the series of the local heroes is completed by the special image of the poet Mzee Omari, a spiritual leader who writes a "poetic history [...] in Arabic letters, in the Swahili language" on Syrian paper, bought from an Indian shop, with pen from Europe and the ink from India (10). Kamal's close relation to Mzee Omari becomes a point of reference in his identity development through the emotional connections that the child develops with Kilwa's oral culture, the heroes, the symbols and the rituals (Hofstede 10) revealing the fascinating history of the place through Omari's poems, recited in the open air (Vassanji, 2013: 9), at the old people's gatherings where even the tragic end of the spiritual leader acquires a symbolic power: he paid for betraying his community ideals when he collaborated with the German colonists. In Mzee Omari's epic verses, young Kamal finds certain answers to his questions about his family and about the surrounding world, and these answers offer him a new perspective on his social relations, which come to enrich his mother's stories with other stories of success, either Indian African or Arab African, and even the recent stories of the courage of the African slaves. Mzee Omari's symbolic value in the community confirms the values the child attributes to his great-grandfather's image, as seen from the community's different angles.

KAMAL PUNJA'S TRANSCULTURAL LIFE JOURNEY

In Vassanji's text, Kamal's life story is closely intertwined with other fascinating stories about Tanzania and its people. The narration brings to life fictional people and

events so that the readers understand and empathize with the characters whose experience may seem remote in terms of space, time and culture. Kamal's story is unique but it also speaks of universal feelings.

Young Kamal's movement from one cultural group to another enriches him with new experiences and perspectives on life based on the others' views of Kamal or his insights on the others. If the pressure of the cultural differences in Tanzania came from the society to the individual, with the family acting like a buffer, in Canada the society does not seem to put pressure on the cultural differences, but they can be still be found within the family which itself becomes a pressuring factor. This is a persistent element of Kamal's journey and the motivating factor of his return in Kilwa also correlate with the trajectory of his evolution: coming to terms with his past.

In Canada, ethnicity seems irrelevant for Kamal's social integration and his successful career as a doctor, through which he gains respect and recognition. However, his attempt to learn more about his descent from African slaves, and to share this knowledge with his family, is discouraged by his wife:

> In spite of his evident African features, there was no way he could make his wife, Shamim, acknowledge his Matumbi origins. "Why do you want to bring this hypothetical connection into our lives?" she asked bitterly. The very thought caused her anguish, and he could well be guilty of mental cruelty. "The kids have enough handicaps as it is without your Matumbi complex." (49-50)

Thus, the increase of the cultural distance within Kamal's family leads to the deterioration of the relations between family members and Kamal's loneliness, as he needs to understand his ancestry and to continue his personal search.

In Kilwa, back in the years of Kamal's childhood, the perception of his double affiliation is reflected by the others' use of the label "half-breed" (27). At the social level, this racially biased perception is historically grounded as a marker of difference, and relates to the role of the various ethnic groups in the city's colonial and post-colonial history. In the collective mentality his parents' belonging to different ethnic groups was seen as a specific contribution to the local history and was reflected by different value judgments. Under the circumstances, Kamal's mother assumes the buffer role, protecting Kamal from the effects of discrimination. The narrator's references to Kamal's childhood balance the local angles of perception depending on the cultural

groups in which the child develops his social relations. Therefore, in Kamal's adolescence in Dar es Salaam, his school friends call him "*golo*, meaning servant or slave" (195), which has a stronger perception of discrimination and more significant effects on Kamal who, with his uncle's support, reacts against this labeling. Properly educated by his African mother, with the blessing of his forefathers resting in the African soil, this gifted descendant of an Indian doctor and an African single mother has gradually become clearly situated in the community structure whose main attribute of cohesion is respect.

It is important to underline the context which is the trigger of this emotional balance between Kamal's identity and his cultural heritage. Kamal Punja rediscovers all these challenges in a moment of mature reflection occasioned by his son's attitude of rejecting the African roots of his heritage. The character's overcoming of the constraints caused by the cultural differences in African society is contrasted with his Canadian status, as the narrator shows that the family's only connection to Africa is the money that Shamim, his wife, sends to the victims of AIDS and "utter rejection by his private-school son. And Kamal had not brought up the slave ancestors yet." (29) In this context, the correlation with his childhood becomes inevitable, reinforcing his emotional sacrifice: what he had to give up in order to become the successful Canadian doctor, the good husband and father.

The theme of Kamal's childhood and adolescence in Tanzania and his studies in Uganda complete the image of his identity creation with relevant moments which explain the path of his becoming. An important step in defining his identity correlates to the day when Kamal's mother sends him to live with his Uncle Jaffu Ali Punja in Dar es Salaam, to "become an Indian" (182) or "a *Shams*i. A singing Indian" (193) as his father wanted for his son:

> "You are now a *Mhindi*, an Indian, and will live like a *Mhindi*. You will go to a good school and you will learn. Your father wanted that. Forget about the past. It is over." *Yamekwisha*. The boy started to cry and was taken upstairs to the family flat. (186)

This decision shows Kamal that the absence of his father does not exclude his authority. Even if, at first, the "African" Kamal resists the changes, he seems to become integrated into the Indian community of Dar es Salaam As Kamal's life unfolds, he obtains the necessary confirmations of his becoming by overcoming the constraints imposed by the African socio-cultural context, which accentuates the rational side of his life

perspective before leaving for his medical studies in Kampala, Uganda. Later, his separation from Africa (in the context of an army coup led by General Idi Amin who ordered all Asians to leave Uganda) also means his separation from Saida, to whom he passionately promises to return.

From the inner frame of reference, in his childhood young Kamal perceives himself as an African who cannot speak Gujarati and does not eat Indian food. However, spending his teenage years in his father's family gives Kamal an awareness that "he could never get the African out of him" although he was sent to "claim his father's heritage" (28) which shows that the most difficult cultural limitation that he has to challenge is the attempt of his self-discovery. As one of his mother's "riddles" suggests: "That is because you are an Indian who is more African than all these Africans walking about. And a better Indian than all these *Banyani*[7] shopkeepers. Remember that." (36) The way in which the adult Kamal interprets differences is suggested by a scene in which he is looking at the only family photo, which seems to give him an understanding of the reasons for his father's leaving: "There was that picture, the telltale snapshot that he left behind, evidence of his fall from Indian respectability – having gone local, fathered a half-breed, an outcaste whom he could never call his own back in Gujarat" (27). The narration highlights Kamal's inner contradictions which gradually develop into his decision to return for Saida.

The entire emotional charge of this space, in which history and politics, intertwined with poetry and the dark spectrum of the magic rituals, amplify the importance of the cultural elements, contributes to young Kamal's identity creation. The cultural space that puts in contact Tanzanian society, the still vivid legacy of the German and the British colonists, the African, the Arab and the Indian traditions, leave their indelible imprint on the adolescent who finds himself in love with his childhood companion Saida.

The intense role of tradition and its amplitude in community life is a means of preserving the cultural identity, of making the difference and is also the ethnic groups' defense reactions, rooted in the colonial history of the place. At the same time, the narrator seems to feel the need to explain the context, emphasizing that, in the collective mindset, tradition functions as a safety mechanism. Back in Kilwa, Kamal talks about his childhood and adolescence without taking sides; he asks questions but does not try to identify anybody's guilt. The narrator's tonality does not show rebellious accents.

The perspective is that of a character who has achieved peace with himself, because Kamal tells his story to Martin Kigoma after meeting Saida. At the same time, Kamal's achieving of self knowledge through narration underlines what Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher, calls "this remarkable aspect about knowledge of the self as being an interpretation" (8) as "the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly through a detour of cultural signs of all sorts which, articulate the self in symbolic mediations" (80). Kamal has reached the moment when his inner balance and his potential of going further allow him to go beyond the emotional anchors that have influenced his rational perspective.

THE LINGUISTIC FACTOR

Throughout the narration the linguistic factor emerges as a means through which Kamal manages to familiarize, to know and to understand the realities and the cultural symbols: learning English in Kilwa; then Kutchi, the language of Gujarat which he spoke in Dar es Salaam; learning a little Arabic from Saida or teaching her a little Swahili. From all this linguistic activity he develops the intercultural connections necessary in this hybrid space, also catalysing the character's construction of identity beyond the essential categories to the "spaces in-between" (Bhabha 2). Thus, from an early age Kamal witnesses the power of the words in giving the reality a new perspective: "When a verse was recited, it had received birth. It was a bead to join a rosary of beads, its four lines artfully constructed in that unforgettable rhyme, *aaab*, to please the year and the mind, and also to instruct" (Vassanji, 2013: 39). The language of these verses is living proof of the hybridity of the place: "They would all repeat the prayer with him in a chorus, then get up to go, the more knowledgeable among them ready to discuss the fine points of prosody: the subtlety of a rhyme, how the Arabic pronunciation lengthened a vowel, how a German word had saved the integrity of a line, and so on." (39)

Likewise, the character's familiarity with other languages is the mental instrumentation for his direct access to a plurality of cultures and the preparatory basis of his adjustment to Canadian society. At the same time, such openness repositions Kamal in the relations to his Tanzanian social group who perceive it as a distancing. For instance, Kamal's mother is unable to speak English and Bi Kultum, Saida's mother, fears Kamal may share too much knowledge to Saida and make her less prepared as a future Muslim wife. The trespass of cultural borders through access to knowledge is to be found later in the novel in Martin Kigoma's words:

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[7] *Indian trader.*

But this man before me demonstrated how complicated a real life could be in our times, how painful the idea of belonging. I myself am to send my youngest away for his education, and I worry, will he return? As what? (90)

THE DECISION TO RETURN TO KILWA

In retrospect, the mature Kamal Punja remembers the attraction exerted by this space which "He had left half a lifetime ago, more; he had made a life elsewhere, planted roots there; and still Kilwa haunted." (Vassanji, 2013: 13) He asks the type of who-am-I and what-I-might-have-been questions which motivate his return to Africa, not just to find Saida, but also to cover his inner unrest.

The return to Saida and his roots has taken thirty-five years in which, as the narrator points out, Kamal's secure and comfortable life in Canada, his career and fulfilled family life temporarily overshadow the feelings of guilt, his identity crisis, and ultimately his decision to go back to Kilwa. His state of inner turmoil is also related to the passing of time and to the fact that he cannot share it with his family members, creating a rift between Kamal and his wife and children.

Kamal's journey back to his roots is revealed through a complex architecture organized around the question "What if?" which also echoes in Martin Kigoma's words:

> Would he have been better or worse off than what he became? A well-known and affluent doctor in Edmonton: the thought came to my mind just as he asked, "What do you think?" "I don't know, really. One of those hypothetical questions, isn't it?" The instinct was to say he would have been better off back home and rooted among his people, but on the other hand, more rationally, surely the opportunities he had had could not be so easily dismissed. (89-90)

Kamal's understanding of the cultural values, which he initially perceived as limiting his belonging to a cultural group, leaves a long-lasting trail in his memory, as shown by his behavior towards the people he meets during his return to Kilwa.

MEETING SAIDA

Kamal's reunion with Saida, his beloved, becomes a narrative turning point in the novel which bears complex meanings. The gravity of the event, which brings the character closer to his death, is depicted in a scene of magic realism in which the shock increases the perception of the cultural differences. Kamal's

confrontation of his past into the realms of magic means his complete surrender to overwhelming occult forces. If, in his African childhood, the magic played a role in the regulation of the social relations, the prevention of dangers, the explanation of the unknown, the inspiration or the healing, in the episode of meeting Saida it acquires a dark dimension with a deep symbolic meaning. Thus, in this magic space in which Kamal meets a transfigured Saida who "looked the same as he had last seen her, many years ago" (295), the character's inner journey brings to the surface feelings of a strong redemptive charge which are possible only through their common experiencing of the event, not a mere talk about the past: "'And I went mad,' Saida said to Kamal. And Kamal screamed. 'Don't tell me more, Saida, don't tell me that!'" (298)

The narration gives the reader the opportunity of witnessing a harsh representation of the distances that the cultural differences may impose. Although it does not exempt African society from guilt, this carefully created image reveals no repulsion, just the cultural depths underlying the perception of differences:

> Now he knew he was dying. He was outside under the wide-open sky, sitting in the grass; his shirt had been removed. His hands were tied behind his back tightly with a rope, and his feet at the ankles in front of him. He sat by himself, awkwardly, pain shooting through his limbs, not far from three or four people who were behind him, discussing him. An old croaking voice that sounded familiar was saying, "My heart says I cannot agree to go through with this, *Bwana* Ngozi. I prepared him for the rite and brought him here, therefore I have fulfilled my responsibility. But to go further and do away with him – here I balk, *bwana*." (299)

Freed from this burden of his past, enriched with a transcultural understanding (Welsch 194-213) of life, rooted in a multiplicity of cultures, Kamal feels ready to embark on a new life stage in which he rationally seeks answers concerning his parents and his self which he now understands from a different angle.

I think that analyzing the consequences of the meeting between Kamal and Saida in Kamal's identity definition would definitely benefit from a detour about the feminine role in the novel. Vassanji's exploration of the masculine and feminine polarization favors the masculine dimension. Gradually, the feminine characters reveal themselves to the reader through the process of mediation. The mediation is achieved through Kamal's

or Kigoma's narration, remembrance or even through magic.

Going further in analyzing the masculine characters, we cannot but observe that the social representations about the feminine characters foreground them as the holders of tradition. Being aware of the social hierarchies, the feminine characters seem to accept them without overtly contesting the distribution of the roles in Tanzanian postcolonial society. Saida, Bi Kulthum and Bi Hamida express themselves mainly in family life. They also show loyalty to the community's tradition which attributes them certain roles and prevents them from freely developing their potential. There are several instances in the novel suggesting the social power of tradition in the feminine characters' development: Saida is married against her will to a local sorcerer Mzee Hamisi and Bi Hamida accepts the marriage proposal, which she has long postponed, going to live in her new husband's home. Likewise, Saida's tragedy, echoing the rigors of Tanzanian traditional society, amplifies the tension and the emotional gravity of the challenges that Kamal is faced with.

HOW DOES THE RETURN AFFECT HIS ATTITUDE?

The validation of his cultural roots is found in the way in which Kamal's return to Africa changes his attitude. In Canada, Kamal has gathered information about Kilwa and started a "treasure hunt" (29) that was not approved by his wife and children:

> And so in the interest of peace in the household, he shelved his ambition to write a family history and restricted his hobby to the confines of his private study, far from everyone else, obsessing over bits of information like a stamp collector over postmarks and perforations. (29)

Kamal has bought a book of "the memoirs of a district commissioner who spent time in Kilwa and Kama", searched the internet or talked to the people about what showed that "Kilwa had an actual existence outside of his memory." (29)

However, his return engages him beyond knowledge to the depth of the heart. For him Africa is first and foremost about the strong emotional connections with his family life and his community ties, about his first love, but it is also about his perception of his mother's betrayal and the unsolved mystery of his father's leaving.

When Kamal chooses to immerse himself in Tanzanian society, the return to his ancestry and cultural heritage heighten the self-knowledge and understanding that enable him to go on with his life on Canadian land. Reactivating the strong emotional components through the direct experience with the people he knew in childhood, Kamal goes back to what he holds dear, but in the end he is not tempted to stay and opts to return to Canada. His direct experiences with the people who have long haunted his daydreaming bring about a new perspective on life.

He has demonstrated to himself that he has not betrayed his roots. In his confrontation with the shadow of the past memories, he has confirmed that everything has a sense: a sense that can be understood only when you know your roots. The starting point for Kamal's inner journey was Africa, but the magic of Africa must be felt at the deepest cultural level in order to be understood, otherwise all the values fade like in a colorless sketch.

CONCLUSIONS

We can draw several conclusions about the way in which this Canadian Indian-African character experiences the process of identity redefinition in multiple multicultural contexts, which can themselves inform us about an immigrant's process of identity construction.

His overcoming of the linguistic boundaries, the access to and understanding of the values and the beliefs supporting the other's behavior, enable Kamal to create his own cultural lens. His values gradually become enriched with new meanings and strengthen the connections to the Indian cultural group which become more familiar, and explain Kamal's uncertain ethnic positioning of his identity, his oscillation between the African heritage which he wholeheartedly embraces and the Indian heritage he gradually discovers.

Knowledge seems to be Kamal's path in his attempt to overcome the challenges in becoming a successful Canadian doctor from a Tanzanian "half-breed." Vassanji allows us to explore the way in which, throughout the process of identity redefinition, the character experiences and understands the volatility of the African multicultural context as the context which Kamal accepts mainly because he knows the roots of every interpretation. In the pursuit of his happiness, Kamal does not become a rebel as long as he finds a stable ground in the scientific field of medicine. He follows a rational path of understanding the emotional pressure coming from society. This way, the cultural roots of African society, a society which cannot fulfill his expectations, become an important support which helps him to understand in order to adapt.

Reading from the perspective of identity construction, the answer is slowly revealed through the choices made by Kamal on several levels: between the African and Indian cultural influences, Kamal finds his own path to

becoming a Canadian who can truly understand and capitalize on both cultures; between the scientific accuracy and the shadow of mysticism, Kamal does not hesitate to confront himself with his biggest fears; between the model of betrayal (evidenced by the examples of his father or the poet Mzee Omari) and the promise made to Saida, he finds a way to return to his family.

Maybe there are no black or white decisions in this process, but there is a confirmation of the way in which identity construction is achieved through the acceptance and overcoming of the challenges brought about by the process of adjustment to new socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, the maturity of this novel does not come from the gravity of the events, but from Kamal's emotional sacrifices. Likewise, the dramatic streak highlights the intensity of his redefinition and inner reconstruction for becoming prepared to overcome the next challenge. At the end of his journey, Kamal has managed to bridge his present life with his buried past.

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[RE]CLAIMING SECULAR JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH BINA

Efrat Sadras Ron, PhD

(Chicago, IL, USA)

Correspondence should be addressed to: sr.efrat@gmail.com

Abstract

The clashing perspectives over Jewishness in Israel, on the one side with an Orthodox minority that is a major political player, and on the other with a secular majority that is politically fragmented, is a cause of constant tension in Israeli Jewish society. In Israel, Jewishness with its religious overtones overlaps with national sentiments. This overlap is one aspect of the Israeli secular story; the Orthodox monopoly over the state's Jewish character is another.

The Jewish renewal movement in Israel looks to bridge and re-establish a reciprocal relationship, between the national and religious aspects of Israeliness with Hebrew culture based on the Hebrew Bible as the common core. The movement calls upon secular Jewish individuals to challenge the Jewish Orthodoxy monopoly in Israel. Furthermore, it is a call for secular individuals to reclaim ownership, and with it authority, over Jewish culture, recreating Jewishness in their own secular image. What exactly is that secular image of Jewishness, is in fact the subject of this paper.

Looking at BINA and its secular yeshiva in the south of Tel-Aviv, I introduce ethnographic data showing how secular sensibilities inform secular interpretations of classic Jewish cultural narratives such as Passover, and the Jewish marriage ritual. Focusing on three secular modes of operation - literacy, personalization and cultural activism - I bring examples of secular Jewish practice. In Israel's socio-political atmosphere orthodoxy has become equated with religiosity, leading many to believe that secularity and Jewishness are mutually exclusive. However, BINA proudly claims its in-between status, representing both the secular and Jewishness, not as oppositions but simply as different cultural frameworks coming together to form BINA, and in turn these frameworks are being reimagined through BINA, embodying the processual nature of culture.

INTRODUCTION

At the age of twenty-two, while traveling in South America, I engaged in a conversation with a British fellow traveler, initiating the journey that led to this research. The conversation started by my traveling companion, as Tom asked me for clarification regarding a Jewish custom. I answered to the best of my knowledge, which was not extensive, considering I was secular and was brought up in a secular home. Yet, it was obvious that I should know the answer; after all I was (and am) Israeli, and for both of us Israeliness was a Jewish membership card. As the conversation went on, I asked Tom about his religion; he simply looked at me and said "I have no religion." I could not grasp it and pressed Tom for an answer, saying "well I know you no longer go to church but still what is your religion." Tom insisted that he has no religion. It was only then, at the age of twenty-two, that I realized that religious affiliation is not inherent to all.

With this revelation resonating in my head, I started questioning the axiom equating Israeliness with Jewishness. I was sure about the components of my Israeliness, but had no idea about what constituted my Jewishness other than being an Israeli. I do not believe in god, I do not uphold any of the religious ordinances and never did; the holidays for me are about family traditions and vacations, they have no religious meaning. And yet it was clear both to me, the insider, and to Tom, the outsider, that I am a Jew. Ten years later, as I was writing my M.A. thesis on Jewishness as ethnicity, I was able to put these thoughts into an anthropological vocabulary. As an Israeli, my national identification was intertwined with my religious identification, and as a young adult I did not realize that

the two are not synonymous. The following ten years leading to the present, have been about figuring out what kind of secular a person is, when her religious membership is included in her national identification.

Israel constitutes a unique case in the Jewish social sphere. Israel was created as a secular Jewish democracy. The majority of its Jewish citizenship self-identify as secular (The Central Bureau of Statistics 2015). In Israel, Jewishness with its religious overtones overlaps with national sentiments. As a result, one's participation in Jewishness is a national activity, thus forming a religiously-infused social atmosphere in which secular individuals act (Liebman and Yadgar 2009). For some scholars who adhere to the religious-secular dichotomy, this fact amounts to the view that secularity is impossible in Israel (Beit-Hallahmi 2007). However, in Israel the framing of Jewishness as a national identification allows people to cultivate their secularity without perceived conflicts. A Jewish Israeli does not need to consciously work out her participation in the Jewish collective, usually involving membership in a synagogue, since this is incorporated into her nationality (Gitelman 1998). Secular Jewish thought has a rich history going back to the 17th Century. It developed concurrently in North America, Europe and Israel. However, as part of both the Jewish and the secular traditions, secular Jewishness has no unifying framework, or infrastructure. Thus, each instance of this phenomenon is best understood as a specific historical occurrence. This paper deals with one such specific instance of this phenomenon, secular Jewishness in the Israeli Jewish sphere, channeled through BINA and its secular yeshiva.

The overlap in secular Israeli society between national and religious identifications is but one aspect of this secular story. The other influence that shapes the secular discourse in Israel is the Orthodox monopoly over the state's Jewish character. The Orthodox Jewish stream solidified in reaction to the reformation movement that took place in the early 19th century. In contrast to world Jewry, and as a result of historical developments relating to the establishment of the state of Israel, Orthodox Jews in Israel are a political power house. In the period leading to, and right after, the establishment of the state of Israel, it was agreed among Zionist leaders headed by Ben Gurion, that unity among the Jewish people is crucial to the creation and survival of Israel as a Jewish state. In the decades that followed, the promotion of Israel as the center of the Jewish world by advocates of Jewish nationality, continued to claim Jewish unity as crucial element (Ben-Rafael 2002). The cost of this Jewish unity was concessions to the religious segments of the Jewish population in Israel, both social and political, in return for their acknowledgment, and later on participation, in the national state which was a secular enterprise at its core.

The social implication of the political sway religious factions have in Israel, is that Jewish Orthodoxy has a monopoly over Jewishness. In practice that means that Orthodox forms of Jewish practice are considered authentic, while other forms, namely Reform and Conservative Jewish practices, can at best be described as marginal in Israel's public sphere. Furthermore, Israel's Jewish Orthodoxy, backed by its political sway, has the power to name that which is Jewish. The most potent example for this issue is the contested control of the rabbinate, a branch of the government controlled by Orthodoxy Jewry, which oversees all Jewish life cycle events. Thus, de facto, the rabbinate has the state's authority to name who is a Jew and who is not. The Jewish orthodox monopoly in Israeli society can be best understood through Bourdieu's (1977) notion of doxa (the perceived 'natural' order): orthodox forms of Jewish practice are 'naturalized' as authentic, right, or correct while the range of possible alternatives is obscured by the presumed authenticity of the orthodox form.

The clashing perspectives over Jewishness in Israel, on one side an Orthodox minority that is a major political player, and on the other a secular majority that is politically fragmented, is a cause of constant tension in Israeli Jewish society. Every now and again tensions rise in relation to marriage, burial, immigration, to name the most acute issues. These tensions have been more than once dubbed by Israeli media as a war over the character of the Jewish state and its people. As a result of this socio-political war the term secular in Israel came to be a divisive term with overtones of antagonism towards Jewishness the religion, as it is formulated by Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel. It is so much so that during my preliminary mapping of the field, I found secular individuals and institutions who dropped the use of the word secular in fear that using the term would alienate anyone who is not an avowed secular.

The Israeli secular Jewish variety is a manifestation of Jewish nationalism, and was epitomized in the kibbutz culture. The pioneers who created the kibbutzim, settled the land of Israel, and where de facto the infrastructure on which, later, the young state was to be built on. They rebelled against the stereotypical religious Eastern-European Jews of the shtetl represented by their parents, and aspired to create a new kind of Jew inspired by secular modernism, and far removed from what they saw as religious backwardness. Throughout the first decades of the state, the kibbutzim were the

emblem of this secular Jewishness. The kibbutzim have gone through a period of restructuring at the turn of the millennium, following an ideological, demographic, and economic crisis which almost brought about their demise. The secular Jewish movement in Israel emerged out of the kibbutz movement, partly as a reaction to this crisis. BINA, although not directly affiliated with any kibbutz, operates within the kibbutz sphere. Bina's headquarters are located in the Kibbutz Movement's educational center – Seminar Efal. It is also part of Merhavim, a non-profit organization established by the Kibbutz Movement. Finally, BINA was an initiative of intellectuals and educators from the kibbutz movement among others, following the identity crisis that engulfed Israel after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing religious extremist in 1995.

As noted above, the Jewish renewal movement in Israel is firmly grounded in the secular kibbutz culture. In fact, it is reclamation of Jewishness by the third and fourth generations of kibbutz pioneers. It is a movement that looks to bridge, and re-establish a reciprocal relationship, between the national and religious aspects of Israeliness with Hebrew culture based on the Hebrew Bible as the common core. Using again Bourdieu's (1977) scheme of doxa-orthodox-heterodox, the Jewish renewal movement in Israel is an effort to bring heterodoxy (a range of choices) to the Jewish social discourse in Israel, and in doing so, marking the Jewish Orthodox variety as the doxa in Israel, as the form of Jewishness that is regarded as the 'natural order'.

As a secular reclamation of Jewish heritage, the Jewish renewal movement in Israel has called secular Jewish individuals to get back to the rich Jewish heritage that was left at the hands of Jewish Orthodoxy in the early days of the state. Furthermore, it is a call for secular individuals to reclaim ownership, and with it authority, over Jewish culture, recreating Jewishness in their own secular image. What exactly is that secular image of Jewishness, is in fact the subject of this paper.

BINA AND ITS SECULAR YESHIVA

Reading more and more about secularity, and its Israeli vernacular, I came to realize that although Israel's secular variety is unique in its position versus religion, it is also problematic. Liebman and Yadgar discussing the use of the Hebrew term for secular (hiloni Heb. חילוני) in Israeli discourse, state that "[t]he problem is that the term ... tells you what somebody is not, rather than what somebody is." (2009 151). That means that looking into the meaning of secularity in Israel will either be met with a simplistic 'non-religious' type of response; or discarded as a term which only serves to inspire conflict.

In the energetic field of Jewish renewal in Israel where, as I noted, many do their best to avoid the secular label, I found the Secular Yeshiva of Tel-Aviv operated by BINA – Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture. BINA has since changed its name and today goes by several slightly different titles: a. BINA Movement for Social Jewishness b. BINA Center for Social Jewishness c. BINA Educational and Learning Center for Jewish Identity and Israeli Culture. This is an emblem of BINA's secular dynamic approach to cultural production and its culture of negotiation and change, all part of its commitment to the secular.

As mentioned earlier, BINA was established in 1996 by educators from the kibbutz movement and elsewhere. BINA's operations encamp a vast array of social segments in Israel. Its main areas of operation are: the Secular Yeshivas network, Public Schools, Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Diaspora Jewry, and Beth Midrash for the general public. In all of these arenas BINA's goal is to influence the character of the state of Israel by inspiring future leaders and activists in Israel, through social activism grounded in secular Jewish philosophy.

The field of Jewish renewal in Israel has seen a major resurgence following the identity crisis brought about by the murder of PM Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. In the analysis and mapping of the Jewish renewal field in Israel (Midot.org.il 2013) approximately 180 organizations took part in the survey. Four percent of those organizations were categorized as top-level organization under which other organizations and enterprises operate. BINA is one of these top-level organizations. Its officials are interviewed in popular media as well as expert pieces (such as Midot's mapping of the field of Jewish renewal referenced above) as representatives and leaders of this trend. Corporation between the different organizations within the Jewish renewal movement is the standard (Midot.org.il 2013).

Organizations on all levels (from independent communities to top-level organizations such as BINA) share resources and corporate in activities whenever their activities coincide either in theme, geography, demography or any combination of the three. It is worth noting that Reform Judaism although not a classic part of the Jewish renewal movement in Israel works together with organizations such as BINA, against Jewish Orthodoxy's monopoly over state policies, budgets, and Jewishness at large. No actual numbers about membership in specific organizations, or identification with any ideological stream could be found, and even estimations run from several thousand to several hundred thousand participants in the field. This lack of official knowledge of the field partly results from the fact

that these organizations are not recognized by the government as Jewish organizations deserving of allocation of budgets. Ignorance as to the extent of the phenomenon help maintaining the discourse marginality prevalent in its context. In other words, it help maintain Jewish Orthodoxy as doxa, as the 'natural' order in Israel.

In BINA's Secular Yeshiva I found a place that not only embraced its secular heritage with no apologetic maneuvers, such as utilizing terms like plural or humanistic in place of secular; but which also dared to couple itself with the Jewish religious term for seminary or school: 'Yeshiva'. This polemic title chosen by the decision makers at BINA was a clear statement as to BINA's cultural milieu. It proudly waved two flags of affiliation: the secular and the Jewish. Furthermore, BINA as an organization did not want to apologize or hide its secular background from Jewish aficionados in fear of being stereotyped as anti-religious; and on the same token saw no need to apologize to secular die-hards for its love and appreciation for the Jewish religion. Furthermore, in claiming the Yeshiva in its title, BINA's decision-makers were making a clear statement about the kind of studies they wanted to offer: studies at their institution would be in-depth exploration of Jewish texts, employing yeshiva study methods such as Havruta. Notwithstanding, these studies would be in a secular spirit using reasoning and critical thinking. Indeed, BINA's secular yeshiva is a co-ed institution, in which Jewish texts go through a process of innovative interpretation, at times in contradiction, disagreement, and negation of authority and/or authenticity of the text. Sources outside the realm of Jewishness are used to illuminate classic Jewish texts. In short, in the secular yeshiva's critical approach, nothing is taken for granted, all aspects of the text are investigated including, but not limited to, authorship, syntax, intertextual references, vocabulary, and historical context. Finally, the right of the individual to change and innovate, both the text and its interpretations is assumed.

A direct line can be traced from BINA's secular approach to Jewishness to the forefathers and founders of modern Jewish secularity. Spinoza is seen by many in the field as an originator of modern secular Jewish thought (Biale 2011). From Spinoza, through Buber, Freud, Ahad Ha'am, Bialik, and Brener (to name just a few) to the Kibbutz movement and finally BINA as a product of that movement, one can trace the development of the secular Jewish principles present in this paper: literacy, pluralism, personalization and cultural activism (Biale 2011, Kogel and Katz 1995). Individualism played a major role in the European Enlightenment followed by the Jewish European emancipation in the nineteenth century. The tension between individualism and collectivism was an important force in breaking the Jewish Ghetto walls at that time (Eisen 1994). The struggle between the two has continued into, and within, the Kibbutz movement. Starting as a social institution based in collectivism, but founded by individualists rebelling against religious Jewishness, the Kibbutz movement as a collective institution, almost dissolved at the end of the 20th century under the pressure of individualism, only to redefine the balance between the two (Gil 1996). At BINA, its members continue to negotiate the relationship between collectivism and individualism.

Pluralism is an additional thread connecting the secular Jewish forefathers, through the Kibbutz movement to BINA. Pluralism and individualism are highly intertwined. It is pluralism that helps elevate the inherent tensions between individualism and collectivism, by acknowledging differences and rejecting conformism. It is the personalization of Jewish cultural artifacts (in the broadest sense of the term) like the bible and the holidays, stemming from individualism, which brings about cultural activism and creation. Such personalization was central to secular Jewishness from its precursor Spinoza, through its founders and forefathers, such as Buber and Freud, all the way to Ahad Ha'am and Bialik (Biale 2011). In its early days, secular Jewishness was preoccupied with the creation of the nation, and thus overlapping in many aspects but not all with Zionism, the Kibbutz movement being one of the most notable expressions of this overlap. By the start of 21st century the ethos of nation building has morphed into cultural and social activism within the Jewish state, the two declared goals of BINA as a Jewish Israeli educational institution.

Although the nature of a narrative that have passed through history is to obscure pluralism in favors of cohesion and political agendas, literacy is a crucial tool in revealing the layers of pluralism constructing such narratives, which have been edited again and again through the eras. Literacy is no less important for the process of cultural activism and creation, than is pluralism. No creation can be made of nothing; any cultural creation is based on culture that preceded it. Thus, there is a general agreement that secular Jewishness derives inspiration and meaning for its innovations from past traditions, traditions that are typically religious (Ackerman 2010, Biale 2011, Cohen 2005, Jobani 2008, Malkin 2000). It is the idea that the secular derives <u>inspiration</u> from the past rather than <u>authority</u>, that leaves an open space for creativity and innovation (Brinker 1989). It is the Jewish secular stance

that religious sources should be reinterpreted by individuals – personalized – and be filtered through the sieve of critical thought. Such a process of critical reinterpretation requires the ability to choose out of a massive body of Jewish heritage those sources from the past that are relevant to the cultural project taking place in the present (Cohen 2005). Literacy, and more specifically Jewish literacy, i.e. a knowledge of, and familiarity with, what is known as 'the Jewish bookcase' is fundamental to this process. However, literacy in itself is not sufficient for the creation of secular Jewish culture; in order for cultural conceptions to be marked as secular they require literacy, but they also need to pass through the filter of critical thinking and finally to be open to individual interpretation and adaptation.

 The coupling of the term secular and yeshiva at BINA is a socio-political claim against Jewish Orthodox monopoly in Israel; governmental budgets to yeshivas defined as such by Jewish Orthodoxy are a constant contention point in Israeli politics. In calling their educational institution a yeshiva, the founders of BINA make a claim to the same privileges accorded to the religious yeshiva, albeit without much success as of yet. With such a clear statement made in its title I knew BINA is a place that is as deeply committed to secularity as it was to Jewishness. I knew that in such a place I would find a real engagement with the term secularity and with the question 'what does it mean to be secular?' in the context of Jewishness. I had found my research site.

At BINA I conducted 26 interviews: ten interviews with the After-the-Army program participants, ages ranging from 22 to 30 years old, and the other 16 interviews with BINA's staff members, ages ranging from 30 to 73 years old. As part of the interview, interviewees were asked to self-identify. Of the 26 interviewees 12 identified simply as secular; three interviewees self-described as secular traditionalists meaning secular persons that practice Judaism to some level; two claimed religiosity, while two others simply identified as Jews; two refused definitions altogether. The other five responses included: atheist, agnostic, not religious, humble human being, and searching for god. These varied self-definitions are indicators of the diversity in Jewishness hosted by BINA.

The After-the-Army program targets young adults who completed their army services. In 2011, there were between 10 and 12 participants at any given time. Their ages ranged from 22 to 30 with the mean being 24. Their social background was diverse: two were recent arrivals to Israel, and those raised in Israel hailed from all parts of the state. Three had experienced kibbutz living.

Most of the data presented stems from participant-observations sessions conducted during the academic year of 2011-2012 with the After-the-Army program. The program took place at the Secular Yeshiva in Tel-Aviv on Thursdays and Fridays, full days and half days, respectively. It included instructions in prayer, Zionism, Hebrew culture, Talmud, holidays and the Jewish life cycle. Its purpose was to promote an intimate and honest investigation of one's own Jewish identification alongside Jewish literacy.

The following is an ethnographic presentation of BINA's teaching methods and content, as they showcase core secular principles applied to Jewishness. Based on my field work at BINA in 2011-12, I present the reasoning behind the teaching and methods of BINA's yeshiva as a secular Jewish institution, thus delineating the ways in which BINA as a Jewish educational institution exercises its secularity. BINA's teachings, teaching content and methods promote the institution's end goal of Jewish cultural sovereignty and the legitimization of the secular-Jewish practice. In order to attain such a goal, one must be able to participate in the discourse as an equal – hence the importance of literacy: one must be able to show that what one knows is in itself a product of debate and historical selection – hence the interest in multiplicity of voices over time and space. Consequently, absolute authenticity cannot be assigned to any cultural artifact – hence critical thinking, a non-deterministic strategy for decision-making fitting for secular dynamic multiplicity. In removing the idea of absolute truth, a door is opened to innovation and cultural production – emanating from activism and individualism – and eventually leading to legitimization and cultural sovereignty.

My starting point is the pursuit of literacy as an aspect of critical thinking, a core secular principle. The main purpose of literacy is the creation of proficiency that accelerates participation in discourse, which in turn enables cultural activism and production. I then move on to examine the concept of multiplicity. It is through literacy and critical thinking that layers accumulated in narratives through their transition in time and space are exposed, with multiple voices, disputes, and changes in the narrative being retrieved from the shadows of history in the process. Traditions as brought to us through rites, ceremonies and scriptures carry no unique status of truth or authenticity beyond those accorded to them as artifacts that have survived the forces of history (Anderson 1991 [1983], Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and literacy aids in countering any such claims.

The recognition that traditions, as we know them, have not been entrusted to us in their present form from the beginning of time asserts these traditions as human products, subjective and grounded in social and

historical context. In turn, this human contingency serves as a precedent, first in challenging the accepted traditions of the present day, and ultimately for ushering in change. It is in this part of the secular process of social change and innovation that individualism and activism are brought to the fore. It is through individual creativity and its interaction with other individual creativities, that innovation comes about (Hill, et al. 2014). In the case of Israeli Jewish secularity, the guiding motivation for these innovations is cultural activism and ultimately its production in the here-and-now. That is, innovations are intended to reinforce the connection between the actors and their culture, as well as between the actors and their surroundings in the present. Thus, innovations are a form of individualization and personalization of collective traditions in the secular Jewish milieu.

I will now illustrate how these secular notions of *literacy, personalization, and cultural activism* are applied to BINA's teaching of the Passover dinner sacrament, the Jewish marriage ritual, and its celebration of Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement).

LITERACY

> *"My personal process at BINA, that is highly significant...is that I speak secular Jewishness without confusion ... I can say on several different levels that I am Jewish without keeping the religious laws or encompassing the entire world [Jewish literary world]."*
>
> [Statement by Noa, of BINA's educational department.]

BINA puts Jewish cultural literacy as it is reflected from a secular Western background at the top of its priorities. BINA's officials have stated that they were concerned with providing their secular patrons the knowledge required for them to engage with their Jewish heritage in a meaningful way. Rami, a longtime educator at BINA, sees culture as based on practices, i.e. how people behave and what they do, which defines who they are much more than their beliefs or ideologies. For this reason Rami sees the knowledge of Jewish cultural sources, such as the canonical texts and the holidays, as extremely important for cultural activism, as they provide the necessary fountain of resources for participation in the culture. Indeed, Rami's courses, and other activities he heads in BINA, revolve around the holidays and life events – i.e. practices. His teachings are intended to give students maximum exposure to a single subject, i.e. to promote literacy and through it individualized cultural activism as an expression of sovereignty. In the context of the creation of cultural

meaning through literacy and intertextuality, Rami goes beyond the written text to explore the layers within the ceremonies, and demonstrates the ways in which meaning is derived through intertextuality and literacy. The following excerpts from Rami's teaching of Leyel Ha Seder (הסדר ליל), the ceremonial dinner celebrating Passover and the commemoration of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, provide a good illustration of this process.

Here is a discussion of the Matzah (the unleavened bread eaten during the week of Passover), its origins, its symbolism, and the traditions of which it forms a part. The first excerpt is Rami's discussion on the reasons for eating unleavened bread in Passover.

> [Rami] – [...T]his is not ... bread of haste [bread that did not have time to leaven], it is poverty bread. So we have another story [referring to Exudos 12:8] ... meaning we have three stories [explaining] why the matzah is eaten. ... one story is haste, second story is poverty bread which is told in *This is the Bread of Affliction* [passage from the Passover Haggadah] ... and the third reason is ... they were originally ordered to eat the matzah. Why do I note this? Because we now read in chapter 12 verses 1 to, (I do not remember what), that they were originally ordered to eat the [...] sacrifice [of Passover] over matzah and bitter herbs. [. . .]
>
> [Or] – But where is [poverty] bread?
>
> [Rami] – Poverty bread appears in the Haggadah, and it has another source ... but what I want to tell you is that first of all, all of this teaches us once again what we have seen several times: that a holiday always has more than one origin and that it is tradition upon tradition. It's a thing hanging down from a thing. What does the research say? The research presumes that the matzah is the ancient form of bread, meaning the matzah is the simplest form of bread.

The above is a discussion of the very origins of matzah and its association with the rites of Passover, through which students are able to gain access to the traditional knowledge alongside that knowledge which is part of the rational secular milieu.

The next excerpt is a discussion of the symbolism of the matzah as part of the Passover Seder. In this discussion we can see again the ways in which Rami relates the associations of the Seder ritual with general Jewish rites and their adaptation to Passover, exposing ceremonial intertextuality.

[Rami] – [T]here are three matzahs. Why three matzahs? [...] we know that in every holiday [dinner] two breads are served to the table. ... In each holiday and Sabbath a secondary bread is eaten, again in memory of the wandering of Egypt when it was forbidden to gather Manna [bread] and quail during Sabbath. And then they were given a double portion on Friday, and in commemoration of that we eat on Sabbath, [sic] serve to the table two loaves of bread. That is what is dictated to us regarding Passover only that in Passover there is an additional matter: a part of the matzah needs to be saved to the end [of dinner] and it would be called Afikoman [...] this is why three matzahs are served [to the table]...

We can see how a broader context, going beyond the Passover Seder, continues to inform the customs of the Seder, all of which bring meaning to an otherwise esoteric set of customs.

In the following, Rami recounts the transformations and reinterpretations a custom may go through – in this case the celebratory feast of Passover. In doing so Rami dispels the idea of a monolithic tradition, which by definition rejects change and adaptation.

[Rami] – Right, it seems this was the setup of eating at the family Passover [feast] or at the community Passover [feast] as it was, and of course, later in Passover [feast] at the Temple. But later when the temple was destroyed the sages regulated. When the Temple was destroyed the sages faced the question of what to do with the rituals that were customary at the Temple. [...] Then they went in two ways: some of the things they determined will no longer be done this way. [...] For example, sacrifices: no sacrifices. There is commemoration of sacrifice. There is exchange of sacrifice. By the way, our prayers are, for example, an exchange for sacrifice [...] we had Shaharit [morning] sacrifice – [now] there is Shaharit prayer. We had Minhah [afternoon] sacrifice – [now] there is Minhah prayer [...] That is, there is an exchange of the sacrifice, or an exchange of sacrament in a certain way. And there are things they said that even though it was customary to [do at] the Temple it will now be done everywhere, [...] meaning, some selections of fractions [of sacraments] they preserved as commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, [and some sacraments] were passed on to communities and synagogues [...], and [to some] things they said no. [...] By the way, there where disputes around this. We know there were disputes; we know there were people that sacrificed on Passover after the destruction of the Temple. But at the end this method was not accepted

By showing the transformation of the sacrament as was required in the historical present, Rami relays to his students that making choices in their present is not breaking with tradition, as Orthodox elements would want them to believe; on the contrary, they are continuing tradition.

In my final excerpt from this study of Passover traditions I bring Rami's treatment of one specific rite involving the matzah at the Seder – the Afikoman. The word Afikoman has Greek roots and signifies 'after meal nosh' or dessert.   It is the term used for the matzah that is hidden during the Seder. It is customary for the children to seek the Afikoman, and upon discovery, to be rewarded in a materialistic way, most commonly in the form of money. In the following excerpt Rami explains the development of this tradition and its meaning.

[Rami] – [T]he Afikoman needs to be saved to the end, which is why I break something from it. Now, what is the logic? [...] the goal of Passover is to tell to the kids, to tell them of tradition, so among other things, [the] sages thought how to keep the children interested in the story, and part of it is games. [...] [N]ow, we need to end the meal with eating this matzah because it concludes the Passover. Without it, so you understand [...] the meal is not over: meaning, if we went to Aunty Sarah [for Passover], we are there to this day if we did not eat the Afikoman. We are forbidden to leave the house. [T]he meal is not over. What do the kids do? [They] steal. Why [do they] steal? So we will redeem [the Afikoman], because we are willing to pay all the money in the world to be freed from Aunty Sarah. O.K.?

[Neharah laughs]

[Rami] – Why are you laughing?

[Neharah] – Because I lost the connection

[Rami] – The Aunty Sarah connection

[Neharah] – Why do they steal?

[Rami]- Because they want to extort us, because it is clear to them that we have to eat this.

[Neharah] – Ahh, okay.

[Rami] – Because without this the Seder cannot

end 'then we and our children's childrens... captives at Aunty Sarah until this day

[Neharah] – so, like, a game to entertain them

[Rami] – So they steal, sure...they steal it so we will redeem it, then we will pay any amount, right? Point is that we could escape. Okay? Nice. What are we doing so they do not steal?

[Students] – Hide

[Rami] – Hide. You see how the game developed. So a game developed.

[. . .]

[Rami] – The Afikoman, meaning a stub of matzah I leave to the end [of dinner]. What name this stub of matzah has received? Afikoman, in the sense of snacks...between us, it is not a snack, but [...] a final course: the dessert [...that] ends the meal. Meaning, there is [...] similitude of things. Instead of eating a piece of the meat [from the sacrifice] as the last course, I eat a piece of matzah. This matzah I name Afikoman for the after-meal nosh that was forbidden to me. It is very confusing...

These last few excerpts have demonstrated the evolution and development of rites and traditions, while also exposing the layers of transformation and change undergone by these cultural narratives over the course of time. These multiple interpretations are brought to the present through cultural literacy, while multiplicity is the background for dynamism and flexibility. The two are required in order to adapt and adjust to current circumstances, and a multiplicity of voices provides us with a scope of available alternatives for an individual to employ in the interpretation process. As I have already stated, multiple approaches to the interpretive process are accessible through literacy, and this is an overarching practice and a learning objective at BINA.

The teachers I had the privilege of observing focused their efforts on 'reinflating' their subject matter from the two-dimensional 'flatness' of a written historical text. Words were therefore investigated for their full range of significance; editing questions and motivations were addressed, and alternative versions brought to the fore; finally, multiple interpretations of texts and customs both official and personal have been included as part of the discourse and consequently part of the cultural production process. Below I illustrate the way in which multiplicity is engaged in non-textual narratives. I show how literacy and through it multiplicity, both secular modes of operations, inform the study of the marriage

ceremony. Furthermore, it is an illustration of how cultural literacy and multiplicity facilitates cultural production and activism anchored in individualization.

PERSONALIZATION AND CULTURAL ACTIVISM

"[I want young adults at BINA to] feel that they can develop a personal dialog with their culture, not arbitrated, but an independent dialog...the more people will take part in this discourse [the Jewish character of the state of Israel] and will decide what [to include] and what not [to include] and how, [they] will not give the mandate to a specific group to make the decisions."

[Tova, coordinator of the 2011-12 After-the-Army program at BINA's Secular Yeshiva]

In his last class for the 2011-12 cohort of the After-the-Army program at BINA's secular Yeshiva, Rami chose to go over the Jewish marriage ceremony, its costumes, and its narratives. The following is Rami's discussion of the חופה (Huppah – the traditional Jewish wedding canopy). At the beginning of the excerpt you will find Rami's reasoning for his interest and teaching of the historical evolution of the wedding ceremony, a point he repeats several times during this final lesson.

[Rami] – [...] what I am offering people, and this is the point of the study, is to say 'you chose [bride] or you chose [groom] where to get married'. I want for you to at least be familiar with the traditional ceremony as a foundation to what you would want to do later. Now, what is our ceremony? A – We stand under the Huppah. We beginning under the Huppah. Now the question is: what is the Huppah? It is a symbol

[Or] – A symbol for a home

[Rami] – A symbol for a home, a sort of first home we make for ourselves. Do you remember we read the Book of Ruth? And what did Ruth asked from Boaz? 'Spread over me your skirt', right? [...] Rashi explains 'you shall spread your skirt over your handmaid'. Rashi says 'the skirt of your garments to cover me with your cloak, and this is a term connoting marriage'

[Efrat] – Is this all that is needed?

[Rami] – No. But he says it is an expression: 'to spread a skirt' means to gather. [...] By the way, some bridegrooms get married with their prayer shawls, and one of the performative acts of the ceremony is to spread the prayer shawl over the

bride [...] There are a lot of questions [regarding] what is the reason for this Huppah. So, 1 – a symbol for a home: a sort of a prayer shawl, spreading of the prayer shawl. There is another [explanation ...]: in the book of Joel it is written 'let a bridegroom come out of his chamber and a bride from her canopy'. So first of all, according to the paralleled structure of bridegroom/bride-chamber/canopy, it seems that canopy is like a room, or like a tent. And so either it is the women's tent; or there is someone that actually says [... the Huppah is] David's Citadel: [...] a hiding place for the bride and the groom. Now, we know that in ancient times they had to be virgins when married. [...] in fact right after the Huppah, after the marriage, they [officials] would lead [the couple] to a room called the Union Room. Afterwards [the couple] needed to prove that [the bride] was a virgin. In fact he needed to sleep with her there [...] It may be that the Huppah, in this sense, is a symbol with multiple meanings. It is not clear exactly what its origin is, but it could be that in some way it reflects the immediate place of communion [...] even though it is a public [place]. [...] it is the way of symbols that they cling to some form [...] but with some distance from their original meaning; even when the original intent is preserved in another institute – the communion room.

We see here how Rami exposes the different layers from which one aspect of the marriage ceremony – the Huppah – is built.

Rami then subjects the כתובה (Ketubah – the traditional Jewish marriage contract) to the same process. He presents students with the original idea and purpose behind the Ketubah at the time of its creation, and then continues with recent developments to this practice, such as prenuptial agreements which are used both by religious and non-religious couples. The lesson is structured in line with the marriage ceremony, with Rami going over each part of the ceremony starting with the wedding canopy itself, then the different blessings, and ending with the breaking of the glass. At each stage, he asks the students to share what they know of, or assume, is the meaning of the element at hand. He then goes on to share what is known to him, detailing both the circumstances and motivations for the originating of a custom, and then the circumstances and motivations for its development. Rami does not restrict himself to any specific knowledge base in doing so, but introduces any piece of relevant information, be it academic, religious, popular, in the past or from the present. Rami's intention in this lesson is to give his students, all young adults some of whom will no doubt get married in the coming years, an understanding of the meaning held by each part of the ceremony. He aspires to give his students sufficient knowledge so that when the time comes, they can critically adapt the ceremony to reflect the meaning *they* assign to marriage, and more specifically Jewish marriage. He hopes they will exercise their cultural sovereignty and let their individuality be expressed. Here is this sentiment in his own words:

[Rami] – [...] so this is why I [feel] good and comfortable studying the development of things, because I find in there both the argument and the change. In fact, it reveals a culture's face as I wish to perform my own culture in a certain way. So this is what I have tried to do with you [the students] at the end. [I wanted] to show you the development of things: to present to you, here and there, the versions of things so that later [when] you do your own, you will have a more familiar scope to deal with. [...] I hope you will make use of it. I am telling you: you will meet me in 5 years, in 6 years. Here and there we will say 'hello-hello', 'how are you doing', 'where are you at [...] I will not always remember the names. That is alright. You will say 'do you remember teaching us about Hanukah? So I do Hanukah like this and like that'. Then I [will] have satisfaction, I [will] have satisfaction.

The advantages gained by allowing, through literacy, for multiple voices to be heard echoed in history and in the present are summarized by Rami in the beginning of his lesson on the wedding ceremony:

[Rami] – [...] my starting point is that you have to lay clear tiers, which in my opinion are tradition. Meaning, [tradition] that tells some of the texts that are the holiday, some of the behaviors of the holiday, and of course its development. Now, why is [the holiday's] development important to me? The truth is, you do not have to know the development of a holiday to celebrate it. [...] the point is that if I know it [the holiday] a bit from its developmental aspect, then it says to me something about my culture in general. Seeing a culture that develops, changes, and reacts means that that is a part of my language about our own [the actors in the culture] status. **That we are a specific stage that is also obligated to make changes and adaptations in its own way. And**

furthermore, when we want to check what is appropriate, we are likely to find more than once that things we see as appropriate have already existed before. [Emphasis added]

Rami's teachings resonate with the claims of past and present secular Jewish intellectuals (Biale 2011, Cohen 2005, Malkin 2000), that there is no new without the old. Furthermore, without knowing what already exists, i.e. the past, we cannot create and innovate in the present. Multiplicity in stances and voices highlighted through literacy, thus provide the building blocks for cultural production and innovation.

The clearest example of personalization and cultural activism in secular Jewish practice can be observed in BINA's celebration of Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement). The 2011 Yom Kippur celebration took place on one of Tel Aviv's roof tops, during which cultural production was marked as a goal at the very beginning of the celebration. Tova, who in addition to being the coordinator of the After-the-Army program at the time, was also leading holiday celebrations, opened the day with the following remarks:

> [Tova] - The ceremony has two legs, one [rooted] in tradition, traditional classical ceremonies through which [we] connect to the broad [sense of] Jewishness (to the chain of generations and communities of Israel). The second leg [is in] renewal: a want to create a ceremony that is ours, that talks about our values, and discusses our issues in the land of Israel 2011. Integration [in the ceremony] of texts by modern poets, students of the Yeshiva, and staff of the Yeshiva …

Tova continued by asking the audience to allow emotion to be part of the deed. She noted that the Secular Yeshiva deals with the learning that leads to deed, the facilitation of the connection between learning (thought) and deed (action) through emotion. She asked the audience to allow for feelings and through them, to take the journey from the head to the heart. Tova further emphasized that feelings can and should be experienced in two ways: on an individual level, each person within themselves; and through the togetherness of the community.

Cultural activism and the innovations that come along with it provide a means of engaging actors with their culture in the here-and-now. Indeed, this idea of engaging actors with their culture in the here-and-now sets the tone for BINA's public celebration of Yom Kippur. Alongside the traditional blessing of the Shabbat candles which refers to god's command 'to kindle the light of the Holy Shabbat' there is an innovative text written by Arye Budenheimer (known as Buda), member of the founding cohort of BINA. The text includes eleven lines, of which the last four clearly state this idea of the connection between actors and their culture as it is embodied in innovation. Here is the relevant portion of the text:

> Let us make the Shabbat in our likeness and in our image
>
> And let us make peace with ourselves and with our fellow men
>
> Let us give light in the lights
>
> And let us come to the Shabbat with blessing

In these lines we see how the writer, in a secular fashion, positions the actors in the center of the stage, reflecting the action in the actors and thus creating the connection between the actors and the deed.

As the ceremony continued, another innovative text written by Noam Meinart, one of the secular yeshiva's former students, reflected this connection between actors, innovation and culture. The text, given in Figure 1, echoes, in its form and use of words, the traditional text it is meant to innovate. The original prayer is part of the Ashkenazi tradition, and specific to the person serving as the emissary of the community before the lord. The traditional text is intended to distinguish between the flawed personality of the man and the burdensome duty of representing the public before god; the reader will note that the innovative text connects the actors to the here-and-now directly and to the action of cultural production.

The traditional text is directed to god and asks god specifically to put aside the individual infractions of the community's emissary when considering mercy for the community who have sent him to represent them in front of god. The adopted text keeps the very general tone of the original text in that it wishes for a successful fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. However, the adopted text relegates all responsibility to the actors. Furthermore, it points to the here-and-now as the point of action, and then positions the individualization of the atonement process – i.e. innovative production – as a condition of its success, in a way that suits the actors to the point that the innovation will not only be suitable but will actually embody the actors.

Figure 1.

Traditional text from the Ashkenazy Jewish prayer book	*Adopted text written by Noam Meinart, former student in the Yeshiva*
Here I am the impoverished of deeds unsettled and frightened of fear from the one enthroned upon the praises of Israel. I came to stand and beg before you for your people Israel who have sent me. Even though I am not worthy and decent for that. Therefore I ask of you God of Abraham God of Issac and God of Jacob; Lord O Lord merciful and compassionate God, God of Israel, terrible horrible God; Please flourish my way which I walk and about to ask mercy for me and those who have sent me. And please do not incriminate them in my sins, and do not hold them accountable for my offences for a sinner and an outlaw I am. May it be your will Lord God of Abraham God of Isaac and God of Jacob.	We, the impoverished of deed, unsettled and aroused from the splendor of the tradition of Israel, gather here in the secular yeshiva, to build and shape our path in the field of Jewishness. We shall try to realize ourselves and hold a Day of Atonement of our own. May our way that we walk be successful; that we shall not sin to the charge left to us by generations who have passed; that we shall not leave a poisoned fruit to the generations to come; that we shall know to hold our Day of Atonement in a way that suits us, in a way that will be us. Blessed you who say a prayer.

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF SECULAR JEWISH CULTURE

The state of constant change brought about organically, induces anxieties regarding change beyond recognition – i.e. change that will challenge the defining core to which fidelity is held. In relation to the cultural viability of Jewishness, Zvi Gitelman (2009) raises the issue of thick versus thin culture. In this argument, religious Jewish culture is presented as the thick variety – i.e. richer and more likely to sustain group cohesion in future generations – while secular Jewish culture is formulated as thin culture, in danger of becoming 'symbolic ethnicity' and losing its viability. Amos Oz (2005), one of Israel's most well-known literary figures, points to a similar argument specific to the Israeli society, noting that Halakhic Jews conceive of secular Jews as empty vessels, and secular Jewishness as an 'empty wagon', compared to the perception of Halakhic Jewishness as a full wagon. The question then arises of whether the supposedly thin secular Jewish culture is capable of sustaining Jewish identification in generations to come. These doomsday proclamations are expressions of the anxiety of living in constant change, but not necessarily rational observations. Indeed doubt, dynamism, and multiplicity accentuate the risk of survival; however they do not necessarily accelerate the process of demise. In any case, any changes within the secular milieu evolve organically and thus are much less likely to lead to rupture and crisis: assigning the term secular with positive values and principles, such as literacy, individualism and cultural activism helps distance the secular from its presumed nihilism.

CONCLUSIONS

BINA's secularity is not in opposition to religiosity at large. On the contrary, BINA as a product of secular Jewish thought and kibbutz culture was conceived out of the realization that the complete abandonment of Jewishness is unsustainable and detrimental to secular society in Israel. I have noted at the beginning, that the secular is concerned with heterodoxy- i.e. alternative choices. Bourdieu defines orthodoxy in its opposition to heterodoxy. He writes "Orthodoxy, straight, or rather *straitened*, opinion ... exists only in the objective relationship which opposes it to heterodoxy, that is, by reference to the choice – hairesis, [*sic*] heresy – made possible by the existence of *competing possibles* [*sic*] ... (Bourdieu 1977, 169)" Thus, BINA's secularity, and the secular in general, challenges orthodoxies at large by promoting heterodoxy (multiplicity) as a lifestyle and mind set. BINA as a secular Jewish institute exists as an in-between; it constantly negotiates its own structure, purpose, and paths to fulfill its goals. However in all of these negotiations, its fidelity, as an institution and as a community, to the continuity of Jewishness is never in doubt.

In Israel's socio-political atmosphere, Jewish Orthodoxy has become equated with Jewish religiosity, leading many to believe that secularity and Jewishness are mutually exclusive. However, BINA's engagement with Jewish texts and Jewish holidays clearly marks BINA as Jewish. BINA is also clearly secular. Thus, engaging narrative critically, using multiplicity of voices as standard of operation. BINA is dynamic and flexibly changing. It proudly claims its in-between status,

representing both the secular and Jewishness, not as oppositions but simply as different cultural frameworks coming together to form BINA, and in turn these frameworks are being reimagined through BINA, embodying the processual nature of culture.

How then this apparent paradox of secular religiosity is to be explained? A clear distinction between religiosity and orthodoxy at large, is in order. The secular challenges religiosity only insofar as it is represented and monopolized by orthodox doctrines. Understanding secularity in the context of orthodoxies rather than religiosity sheds light on the alliance between nationalism and religion in their opposition to liberalism, both in Israel and beyond. The two camps underlying commonality contain the idea that their own way of thinking is singular in that it is 'true or correct'. The two aspire for their discourse to be 'naturalized' and unquestionable – i.e. to be doxa: the same doxa that once exposed as such, transforms into orthodoxy as the 'conscious systematization and express rationalization' of doxa (Bourdieu 1977). Nationality, with its clear boundaries, both physical and social, and institutionalized religion with its claim to the truth, offer no flexibility, leave no room for dynamism, and stifle individualism with demands for collective conformism. All of these arrest organic change as it emerges out of necessity in the here-and-now.

In the field of Jewish studies, secular identification is a long overdue model of Jewishness that breaks away from the primary understanding of Jewishness as a religious identification defined by the three B's – Belonging, Belief, and Behavior. Furthermore, as the secular is realigned as challenging orthodoxies rather than religiosity, secular Jewishness becomes a viable alternative. The co-existence of secularity and religiosity offers a more holistic approach suited to modern free thinkers, allowing them to actively influence and take part in Jewish continuity.

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