

I Am the Jester

by
Charles Frode

“This vision of a culture of tolerance recognized that incongruity in the shaping of individuals as well as their cultures was enriching and productive...it found expression in the often unconscious acceptance that contradictions—within oneself, as well as within one’s culture—could be positive and productive.”

Ornament of The World: How Muslims, Jews, And Christians Created A Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain
Maria Rosa Menocal

“The mature person has to live with paradox which can be done only if one’s language and imagery are capable of supporting apparent contradictions.”

Religious Education Development
Gabriel Moran

“I am the Jester!” settled nothing and everything, and the impertinent reply satisfied no one, particularly the Caliph, Abu Abdallah Muhammad XII, who, on that grey morning of January 1, 1492, had too many loose ends to attend to given that he had agreed finally to surrender the following day his Emirate of Granada to Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon.

And so, the Caliph ordered his favorite court jester, Francesillo de Zuñiga, to be beaten, as I understand the situation, “vigorously but not cruelly” with the jester’s own gilded oak cane, perhaps because of Zuñiga’s contrived conversion from Judaism to Christianity, or the fact that the Caliph’s courtiers referred openly to the short, fat, but charming fool as King of the Jesters, or most likely because it was common practice to treat the jester as scapegoat for all manner of ills and failures.

I myself tried but never found out how Zuñiga escaped and eventually became the favorite of Charles V in Castile where apparently the king lavished on him rich clothing and shoes of damask, velvet, and silk, and other personal articles; his royal pleasure, companionship, and protection on military, political, and religious campaigns; and later land in the province of Avila. As I understand it, very few court jesters have been treated so well.

The next day, January 2nd, the twenty-second Nasrid ruler of Granada and his retinue awaited as the king and queen left the Genil River and rode up the steep slopes of the promontory overlooking the Plain of Granada to the magnificent earthen red Alhambra where Muhammad surrendered the

last stronghold of the *Al-Andalus* which the Muslims had held since the early eighth century. Everyone had their opinion about whether the Caliph would kiss the hands of Their Highnesses even though the king and queen were dressed in Moorish clothing; or, as I heard Muhammad XII's mother had insisted, sidestep in any way possible the humiliating formality. I was not there to witness the encounter, so I cannot report accurately what happened, although, knowing the Caliph from our scholarly dealings, I can easily imagine him finding some excuse not to demean himself in that way.

It was reported to me a few months later that, as Zuñiga was fleeing with his Jewish bodyguards, he stopped to look south back towards Granada and spoke one of his characteristically sardonic verses, words I hope Charles V would never hear:

With the help of this fool, Muhammad did rule

Granada the city, and, yes, such a pity

That Allah their god caused none to applaud, and

When Al-Andalus crumbled, no Christians were humbled.

I smile now as I imagine his traveling companions laughing and gossiping about Muhammad and his fate at the hands of the Christians, all the exiles relieved, I am sure, to be sharing their verses, songs, insults, fears, and memories in Ladino, our dear tongue, not in Arabic or even worse in Latin.

We were relieved that the king and queen signed and promulgated The Agreements of Capitulation as part of the terms of surrender of Granada wherein all are free to practice their religions in the city without interference. Of course, the position I had held in Muhammad's court and in this city heretofore had always conferred upon me deference and respect and shielded me and my family from having to convert to the Christian religion. We Jews began hearing rumors from our people installed strategically in court that the Christian monarchs would soon banish those of us who had not yet converted to their religion. Little did we know that three months later those same Royal Catholic monarchs would sign The Edict of Expulsion for those who would not convert to their Catholicism. I therefore came to the sad but inevitable conclusion a short time after

Zuñiga's departure that I too had to abandon my life in Granada and flee with my family.

I know some of my people and some of the Muslims could choose to convert but secretly practice their own religion and thus try to continue their own language and culture within the Catholic Granada. I do not disparage them. Who am I to say what is the correct thing to do for another man? Nevertheless, I trace my people, and my family's ancestors back 23 generations originally to Baghdad, then to Toledo and Cordoba, and then here, in our home no longer, Granada. And so, we move on again to find a place of intellectual and religious freedom, if there still exists such a place in our turbulent world. I am not sure.

So now that Ferdinand and Isabella have installed themselves in court as both political and religious authorities, the relatively harmonious and long-lasting Convivencia among our people, the Muslims, and the Christians, is now only a fond but fading memory in our minds. I am now in the process of quietly selling everything of value we own and arranging passage from Malaga to Fez in North Africa. The sooner we can liquidate our possessions and accumulate as many dinars or precious gems as

possible the better we will fare in Fez. I know of several libraries and schools of translation in the old city, Fez el-Bali, where so many of my colleagues have lived and worked relatively peacefully up to now.

I have heard though that many of my people are moving out of the old city into Fez el-Jdid, closer to the royal palace for commercial advantage and royal protection. I understand that several years ago there were attacks against my people there by the Muslims inhabitants, and that thousands of Jews were killed, and many others had to renounce our faith. I hope and pray that these reports are exaggerated and that we might be able to make a prosperous and harmonious life there under the safeguard of Sultan Muhammad al-Shaykh who I hear is protective of our people there. We have no other option I am afraid. If we are not able to do that, perhaps from there we can find our way to Athens or Constantinople, only God knows, only our God of the Torah.

I am Saleem Al-Granati, latest in an honorable line of translators for many generations in the Al-Andalus, since the 11th century when Umayyad Caliph Berber Zawi Ziri established the homeland we now call Taifa of Granada, where our people have lived, studied, and prospered under the

protection of first the Umayyads, then the Almoravids, the Almohads, then finally now the Nasrids for whom we have translated many public and religious manuscripts, books, and documents.

We people of the Torah have always been people of The Word, God's word, and schools and learning are still the foundation of our culture. My family first began translating from the original Greek into Arabic the hundreds of thousands of documents, scrolls, manuscripts, and books gathered and amassed in the many public and private libraries in Baghdad. The caliphs were eager to learn as much as they could from the Greeks, a characteristic both admirable and useful I have witnessed consistently in my Muslim brothers. The story in our family, for example, is that one of our earliest ancestors participated in the translation of Dioscorides' *On Medicine*, among many other invaluable texts.

It is said that my family eventually settled in Toledo in the early 1000s to be part of the famous translation schools there where we soon excelled at all intellectual pursuits, in particular science and philosophy. It was in Toledo that we began the task of translating the many primary Arabic texts regarding astronomy, alchemy, astronomy, botany, agronomy, geography,

cartography, ophthalmology, pharmacology, physics, zoology, and mathematics—algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and Arabic numerals—all into Latin for the Christians to distribute throughout their cities and kingdoms. It was not until the plague and the *annus terribilis* of 1348 accompanied by the riots wherein some 100,000 of our people were killed as scapegoats for the horror of the plague, The Black Death, we call it now, that my family left that inhospitable city for Granada where we have lived and prospered, until now, as translators these past 150 or so years.

Of course, we thank our God that most of our family managed to escape the massacre of December 3, 1066 due to that trust and respect and economic relationships we have had with the Nasrid dynasty for many years until now. Our people pray daily for Vizier Joseph ibn Naghrela, so cruelly and sacrilegiously crucified by the Muslim mobs. Surely the stories passed down about him cannot be all accurate—the royal poisonings, political intrigues, his supposed disbelief in our faith or in Islam, his drunkenness, and his liberality. Yet the Muslims in those mobs certainly believed those tales because after crucifying Joseph, they went on to murder much of our population, most say 4,000 of our people. May God

have mercy on all their souls and forgive the injustice and cruelty of humanity, especially towards our people, the Jews.

The knowledge I have gained, the understanding of the skill and wisdom of the Greeks and the Muslims, and more importantly, the willingness and ability of all 3 people of Abraham—we Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims—to live together relatively harmoniously, to learn from each other, and to distribute and share this precious knowledge so we all can benefit from understanding and tolerance in order to have good lives and do honor to the One God, I fear now is a thing of the past. Now, in place of accepting and understanding the wisdom of each people, we retreat into our own ignorance and limited viewpoints, attacking the other in a misguided defense of our own incomplete view.

I have heard of and at times seen this in all the cities and kingdoms of Al-Andalus—Leon, Badajoz, Toledo, Valencia, Seville, Cordoba, Almeria, and now Granada. There are no longer havens for learning and tolerance where Jews, Muslims, and Christians can live and prosper in intellectual freedom, only now Christian kingdoms where all must convert to their “one true God.” I pray that this will never happen again in the

New World across the sea where I hear there is unlimited land, resources, and the opportunity to make a new life where some say both faith and reason are valued and can exist in mutual support of each other. We will see.

I thank our God also for my blessed wife, Meir, who, like her name indicates, has always been our light, the light of our God, and it was her wise counsel that convinced me that we just leave Granada, alas, most probably, forever. She will travel with us to Fez along with our son, Jehudà, God be praised, our only son and child, born after so many years of my dear wife's barrenness. I prayed constantly to our God, made many sacrifices, offerings at the temple of perfect rams to atone for any sins we might have committed that prevented us from conceiving. God finally heard our hearts and Jehudà was born. God be praised!

In the meantime, I will take with us to Fez the keys to our home in Granada, on the slightest chance of our return, yes, but more importantly to remember our dear Granada and before that Toledo where we worked side by side, mind to mind, with others of our people, with Muslims, and with Christians to bring to light the words of knowledge and wisdom,

Greek words, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, Ladino, the languages of both faith in The One God and universal understanding of the natural world.

These keys from Granada now in my hand are also the symbol of the urgent need now looming to hide and conceal ourselves and our thoughts and beliefs from those whose authority has deluded them into thinking that other different kinds of knowledge are untrue and to be feared and repressed. They have constructed their own beliefs and faith in God to make it so.

...

