Historians of the Atlantic world and the African Diaspora have considered the religious and ethnic lives of Africans and their descendants in Europe and the Americas in broadly two ways. Some studies focus on identification with various denominations of Christianity, while others place the spotlight on “African survivals,” the retention of Islam and animist traditions. But little thought has been given to the relationship of African descendants to Judaism, whose adherents in early seventeenth-century West Africa, Peter Mark and José da Silva Horta argue, were key agents in the intercultural trade, intermarriage, and religious conversion or syncretism that produced the foundations of the Atlantic world. Moreover, this “forgotten diaspora” created a cultural ripple effect that ultimately reached certain Jewish and Eurafrican communities in Europe and the Americas in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The authors focus on three settlements of confessing Jews in Joal, Porto d’Ale and, to a lesser extent, Recife (later known as Rio Fresco or Rufisque), all located in what is today Senegal. These tiny coastal populations, collectively numbering no more than two hundred individuals, were connected across three continents through economic and social networks that encircled Old and New Christians, Jews, Muslims, and animists within the orbit of a lively trade in hides, ivory, and illicit blade weapons (the Papacy had forbidden the sale of arms to the “Infidel” since 1364). All three Jewish communities, their leading members of Iberian origin, lived in the indirect shadow of the Portuguese Inquisition. While no tribunal operated on the Senegambian coast, the Holy Office periodically dispatched visitors (visitadores) during the
second and third decades of the seventeenth century to investigate illegal commerce and the espousal of Judaism, which were intertwined, or to direct local Kings to incarcerate offenders. This persecution generally did not achieve its goal, due in part to resistant local authorities, Muslims informed by a “Senegambian market tradition” that extended hospitality and protection to foreign merchants. The unintended consequence of this harassment was the production of Inquisitorial documents without which we would have no narrative details of these short-lived Jewish clusters in the Petite Côte region.

The Forgotten Diaspora focuses on Portuguese-Jewish identity formation while noticeably avoiding four historical and sociological pitfalls well known to the field of Jewish Studies. First is its rejection of the simplistic division of “Jews” versus “Blacks.” Racial identity in the early modern Atlantic was in flux, with no clear binaries. Luso-Africans are referred to in the sources as “Portuguese,” and West Africans, who easily assimilated outsiders, seemed to have regarded identity as even more flexible, fluid, and independent of physiognomy. Secondly, Mark and Horta view the Senegambian Jewish community not as a discrete society—this is not ‘a history of the Jews of Senegambia’—but rather as one connected through trade and frequent migration to a broader Atlantic world. Next, the authors studiously eschew the chauvinistic assumption that in religiously and ethnically pluralistic environments, Jewishness transmitted through time overpowered other ethnic or religious identities (in this case Christian, Muslim, and indigenous West African traditions). Finally, identity formation for Mark and Horta did not exist in an economic vacuum. While Portuguese Jewish exiles sometimes engaged in theological debate or agonized over religious choices, as Inquisitorial sources show, they shared with almost everyone else a much more mundane motivation: economic survival. By centering the commercial endeavors of these individuals, the authors not only avoid the distorted view that religious persecution defined Iberian-origin Jews, but also circumvent the dehumanizing hero/victim paradigm that burdens much of the historiography.

At the same time, Mark and Horta make a bold claim: early modern Jews, Jewish descendants, and the persecution against them, created the Atlantic World as much as did Christian merchants (p.17). For a book that focuses on three micro communities on the West African coast, this statement is less convincing than it is suggestive. First, the existence and activities of Senegambian Jews may be indicative of other Atlantic communities with a Eurafrican/Jewish symbiosis, where the long tentacles of the Inquisition did not reach, and who have therefore escaped our notice. Secondly, neither absolute numbers nor relative size may be as significant as the elite status these merchant Jews secured in the general
coastal population, a social position that may have widened their sphere of identitarian influence. This is a strong possibility for at least Porto d’Ale, where, the authors surmise, Jews formed a majority of the Euro-african population. Finally and most importantly, the slightness of a community should not deter our interest. Small communities, especially founding ones, can tell us something larger about the Atlantic world, in this case that Christianity, Islam, and animism were not the only choices or possibilities available to West Africans or people of African descent, whether free or enslaved.

While the trove of remarkable Inquisitorial testimony provides the narrative foundation for Portuguese Jewish identity, Mark and Horta also unearthed a small collection of letters penned by Portuguese Jewish women left behind in Amsterdam (the Senegambian communities included no known European females). One wishes that the authors had given more attention, in both the text and the appendix, to this written correspondence in terms of implications for Atlantic families. Similarly, one longs to hear more about the indigenous communities of West Africa who formed both commercial enterprises and households with Portuguese Jews, and of their resulting Eurafrican progeny, some of whom made their way to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, where their presence—contrary to previous scholarly interpretations—was neither exceptional nor uniformly viewed as negative in the early seventeenth century.

Drawing in part on Peter Mark’s specialization in Art History, the authors also consider material culture as a source for trade and cultural production. They pay special attention to a late sixteenth century ivory spoon featuring a hand at the grasping end, which to the authors resembles a yad (Hebrew for “hand”) or ponteiro, the Portuguese Jewish term for the pen-shaped instrument that aids the reader of the Hebrew Bible scroll (sefer Torah). Mark and Horta suggest, albeit with great caution, that this eating utensil expresses, even as it conceals, secret Jewish ritual practice (p.154). But their analysis is not in keeping with written testimony describing the clandestine use of ritual objects elsewhere. Rather, crypto-Jews of the era typically used one of two methods of subterfuge: the concealment of ritual objects in secret openings carved into mundane objects (such as Hebrew prayer books placed inside the hidden storage cavity of a bench), or the use of ordinary household goods for sanctification (a table cloth, for example, that doubled as a prayer shawl).1 If Mark and Horta are correct in their hunch that this Luso-African ivory spoon is a Jewish ritual object in disguise—and written testimony, as they note, is needed to corroborate that—Senegambia’s trading communities created a material method of duplicity at variance with known practices of crypto-Jewish subterfuge.
Founded at the turn of the seventeenth century, the Jewish communities of Joal and Porto d’Ale were not only compact in size, but also in longevity. By 1630, they had “significantly declined” after the return of many original settlers to Amsterdam. The withering of these Jewish centers could have been due to the loss of Islamic influence in Joal, but more importantly, the authors argue, a consequence of the commercial success of many original hide and ivory traders at Joal, which allowed them to return to Amsterdam, reunite with close family members, and join a burgeoning Portuguese Jewish community that had grown to 1,000 members by 1620. Perhaps, Mark and Horta suggest, these merchants had never meant to settle permanently in Senegambia at all.

Much as historian James Sweet has detected in Inquisitorial documents evidence for Islam and African religious traditions among Brazil’s slaves, Peter Mark and José da Silva Horta have shown how this same body of records can uncover the presence and transmission of Judaism on West Africa’s coast. In its reliance on Inquisitorial records as a major narrative source, and in arguing for the role of Iberian-origin Jews as cultural brokers, *The Forgotten Diaspora* is a fine companion to the work of Tobias Green, who has uncovered similar patterns of retention of Judaism, adaptation, and creolization in the contemporaneous Cabo Verde and Guiné. Judaizing New Christian and publicly Jewish merchants were crucial to spreading Judaism in the region, albeit on a smaller scale than other ethno-religious groups who disseminated Christianity, Islam, and indigenous African cultures. Even though the populations under study were both diminutive and fleeting, New Christians and Jews participated in the initial ethno-religious exchanges between African traditions, Christianity, and Islam in Greater Senegambia, and as such played a role in the creation of a Luso-African identity, a Jewish variant of which may have been exported to the greater Atlantic. Mark and Horta are among the pioneers of an expanding group of scholars who regard Jewishness as a noteworthy element in the foundation and development of the Atlantic world. Their book critically advances the legitimacy of the question Atlantic historians must now at least pause to consider: “was Jewishness a factor?” If answered affirmatively, there is no need to claim that this factor was as significant in scale as Christianity, Islam, or animism.

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