



Presentation of Experience

Shabbat in the dark: participatory observation as a relationship building tool in qualitative research

Shabat en la oscuridad: la observación participativa como una herramienta de construcción relacional en la investigación cualitativa

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Article history:

Received: 28 July 2023

Revised: 13 September 2023

Accepted: 5 November 2023

Published: 30 December 2023

Keywords

Honduras

Judaism

Observation

Qualitative analysis

Religious minorities

Palabras clave

Análisis cualitativo

Honduras

Judaísmo

Minoría religiosa

Observación

ABSTRACT. Introduction. There is a gap in the study of Honduran identity and its relationship with religion. For example, Judaism is frequently marginalized and fetishized in a society derived from Christian hegemony. **Presentation of experience.** Standpoint epistemology and participatory observation were used to investigate the Orthodox Jewish community in a synagogue in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Participatory observations were carried out at the Shabbat service, where women of the community participated in the rituals. Information was collected through experience and conversation. **Discussion.** Rituals and practices are fundamental to all religions. In the Orthodox Jewish community studied, it has become a cornerstone. The desire to comply with religious law was logical in a context where observance was the only connection to Jewish identity. **Conclusion.** The value of standpoint epistemology is confirmed by the depth of information obtained by the invitation to join the Shabbat service and the level of involvement permitted. In this instance, participatory observation became a tool to establish trust. In this first view, the exchange of information and a point for future contact was facilitated.

RESUMEN. Introducción. Existe un vacío en el estudio de la identidad hondureña y su relación con la religión. Por ejemplo, el judaísmo es frecuentemente marginalizado y fetichizado en una sociedad derivada de la hegemonía cristiana. **Presentación de experiencia.** La epistemología *standpoint* y la observación participativa fue utilizada para investigar la comunidad judía ortodoxa en una sinagoga en San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Se realizaron observaciones participativas al servicio de Shabat, mediante rituales que involucraron a mujeres de la comunidad. Se recolectó información por medio de la experiencia y la conversación. **Discusión.** Los rituales y prácticas son fundamentales para todas las religiones. En la comunidad judía ortodoxa estudiada, se ha convertido en una piedra angular. El deseo de cumplir la ley religiosa fue lógico en un contexto donde la observancia fue la única conexión con la identidad judía. **Conclusión.** El valor de la epistemología *standpoint* se confirma mediante la profundidad de la información obtenida por la invitación de unirse al servicio de Shabat y el nivel de involucramiento permitido. En esta instancia, la observación participativa se convirtió en una herramienta para establecer la confianza. En esta primera vista, se facilitó el intercambio de información y un punto para un futuro contacto.

1. Introduction

In Honduras, discussions about religion tend to revolve around the role of Catholicism in the formation of Honduran identity (Barahona, 2002). This leaves a gap in the research of non-Christian traditions and the growing phenomenon of Latin conversions to other Abrahamic religions (Bowen, 2010; De Sedas, 2018). Judaism is seen as foreign, ancient and mystical, that is, it acquires an

orientalist characteristic that classifies it as an archaic predecessor of Christianity.

Jewish traditions are occasionally taken over by Christian groups while anti-semitic practices and rhetoric are reproduced. These may be of a phylo-semitic nature; operating under the belief that cultural stereotypes are true and “positive.” This leads to the creation of fetishes around Jewish culture, the reinterpretation of pre-rabbinic texts from a Christian lens, and Christian Zionism (Durbin, 2018; Ariel, 2012).

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Disponible en: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5377/innovare.v12i3.17169>

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Previous works on Honduran Jews focus largely on Ashkenazi Jews and understand Jewish identity as a “race” originating from the twelve tribes of Jacob (Amaya Banegas, 2011). This research rejects the biological aspect of race because it is a social construction that seeks to create hierarchies within a society (Smedly & Smedly, 2005). Honduran Jews are not monolithic and trying to find elemental characteristics among them is an echo of racial “science”. This experience report presents a perspective on Jewish identity, one that is rooted in community and practices and based on a participatory observation approach in an Orthodox synagogue in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

2. Presentation of experience

2.1. Literature review

Religion is understood as a cultural and identity phenomenon that can be studied for its social impacts (Poveda Arias, 2016; Geertz, 2013). Symbols are important when analyzing religion because they support metaphysical meanings, establish moods, and provide social order. Geertz expands on the work of Durkheim (1912) and considers that rituals and practices are central to identity and that religion is the combination of both.

Religion considered as something external is the construction and evolution of intersubjective meanings within the cultural group. This process, as illustrated below, shows that practices and rituals are not abandoned once religion has been established (Figure 1). It is not a sequential process. Religion is sustained by the continuous interaction between community, identities and canonical symbols that maintain a specific meaning for its members. Sonia Zylberberg (2002) explains the power of symbols and practices in religious traditions and how they can be modified or adapted, according to the needs of the community.

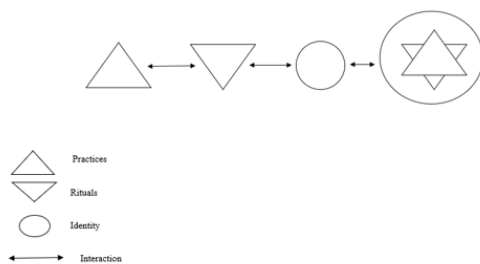


Figure 1. Representation of religion as a social phenomenon.

2.1.1. Participatory observation and standpoint research

Jacobson (2006) developed a qualitative and ethnographic methodology that involved community collaboration and participatory observation in Orthodox

communities in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This approach is ideal for removing hierarchies between researcher and one being researched (Clark et al., 2009), especially considering that the main researcher of this study is a conversion or prospective Giyoret student. The entire Ohr Chaim community is made up of conversion students awaiting their Beit Din, or approval from a rabbinic court, except for the community leader. Considering these parallel experiences, participatory observation adopted a standpoint perspective in this study (Toole, 2022).

2.1.2. Honduran identity

Barahona (2002) dedicates a large fragment of his work to the role of the Catholic Church in the construction of Honduran identity, which began to take root during colonization. It is necessary to consider that religious colonization was a simultaneous process to territorial colonization. Some indigenous people fled deep into the mountains to avoid these colonizing forces until eventually syncretism was adopted as a method of survival (Barahona 2002; Umaña 2017). This syncretism later came to define the mestizo culture, which is the hegemonic culture in present-day Honduras.

Currently, statistics in Latin America record a certain distancing from Catholicism. However, the enduring cultural power of the Roman church cannot be denied. Although Article 77 of the Constitution of the Republic of Honduras prohibits political participation of religious leaders and the use of religion in politics, Christianity has been mixed with the State and politics since the Act of Declaration of Central American Independence (Constitución Política de la República de Honduras de 1982, 2005; Barahona, 2002).

In present time, religious considerations influence discussions about reproductive rights, equal marriage, inclusive education, and LGBTQ+ rights (García, 2022; Naciones Unidas Honduras, 2023). Although the state and the church are separated, the moral foundations of the Honduran state are Christian (Ferrari, 2014). In this context, the Jewish communities of Honduras experience a religious hegemony that still favors assimilation over a visible coexistence of alternative beliefs and lifestyles.



Figure 2. Sign for Beit Knesset Mishkan Shlomo.

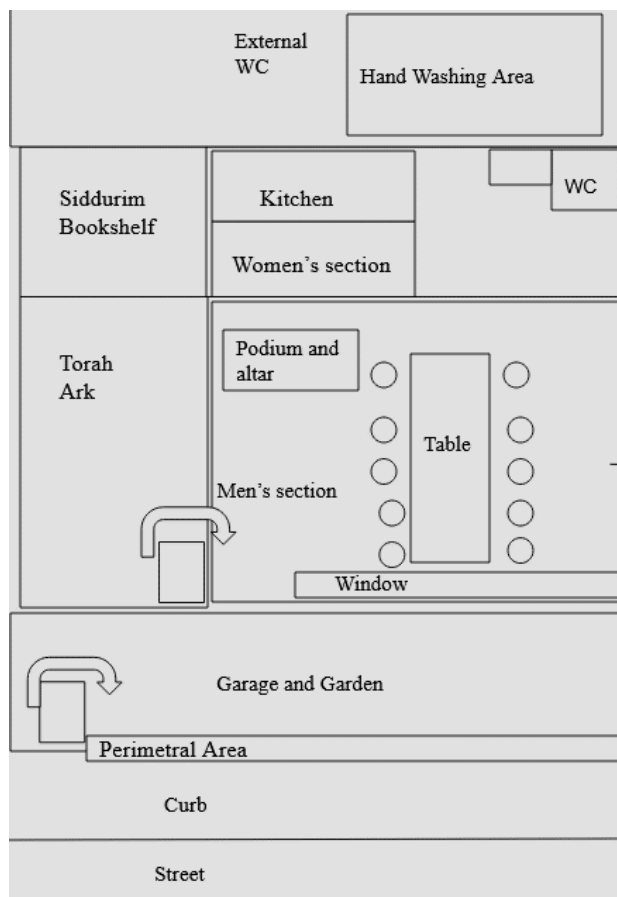


Figure 3. Internal organization of Beit Knesset Mishkan Schlomo.

2.2. The synagogue's physical space

The synagogue is in a modest house in the Suyapa neighborhood in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Its exterior is simple and difficult to be seen by someone who is not looking for it. Only an internal label describes its religious character (Figure 2). The space has been reorganized to separate sections according to gender. The section contains the Torah ark and the male prayer section. The table is used for communal Shabbat dinners (Figure 3). During the visit, it was found that no major renovations have been made to its infrastructure.

2.3. Direct interview

Before the beginning of the prayers, the leader of the community was interviewed. He explained the differences between Judaism and Christianity. The interviewee seemed exhausted during this first interaction, but her attitude changed drastically once the primary researcher explained that she is also an aspiring conversion. This facilitated mutual understanding at the time of dialogue and corroborated Toole's ideas about standpoint

epistemology.

2.4. Shabbat at Ohr Chaim

Shabbat or the day of rest begins on Friday at sunset. This is the most significant weekly ritual. The Shabbat service schedule was provided by our contact on the morning of June 9, 2023. In accordance with religious norms, the researchers opted for modest clothing that covered the arms and legs. A black and white dress code was recommended for respect. The only non-compliance was the use of pants instead of skirts.

The level of Shabbat observance varies from movement to movement and even within communities (Table 1). However, it is the strict observance of Shabbat that separates Orthodox Jews from the other branches. According to the interviewee of this study, this makes Ohr Chaim unique in Honduras. This represented an echo of Jacobson's work on the Orthodox communities in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Jacobson, 2006).

2.4.1. Shabbat service

The first observation made was the size of the community, with just above the minimum number of men to be considered a synagogue. There were sixteen men present, which is usual, and two women. The women were dressed in black and white skirts while only some of the men were dressed in the same colors. Men used a greater range of colors in their clothing, going beyond orthodox norms. Everyone wore a religious head covering and some had traditional tassels underneath their clothing.

Men and women participated in the service in different ways. Since most of the members were men, the women's section was smaller and had the bookcase with prayer books and Shabbat candles. The space is utilitarian and has easy access to the kitchen, which is convenient because the women supervise the cooking. The researchers were asked to do the ritual of lighting the candles. A female head covering was provided for one researcher, while the lead researcher covered her hair with her own silk scarf.

Due to the energy crisis that affected the location that day, the synagogue did not have electricity. This forced the community to convert the garage and garden area into a prayer area. An area was created for women in front of that for men, both in the direction of Jerusalem. Emergency lights were used to assist during the service and cell phone use was permitted, which is generally avoided and even banned in Orthodox circles.

Due to the participatory observation of the rituals, it was possible to witness the details of the religious practices. The women of the community did not join in prayer and singing and were asked to remain seated, except for reciting the Shema, which is the base ritual of Judaism.

Table 1

A summary of Shabbat.

Event	Description	Participant	Noted Practice	Observation
Daven before Shabbat	Prayers before the day of rest.	Men	Prayer in Hebrew done in the direction of the Kotel (the Western Wall).	A small group of men began prayers; members joined in as they arrived.
Shabbat candle lighting	Hair is covered and prayers are said in Hebrew as candles are lit.	Women	The ritual was celebrated in a separate section.	The researchers led the ritual with no male oversight.
Shabbat Service	It begins after candles have been lit and Shabbat has officially begun. It consists of prayers, rituals, and chanting.	Men and women	Separation of duties according to gender. Washing of hands. Blessing of challah and wine.	Researchers were incorporated in religious rituals, without questioning their religious identity.
Shabbat Dinner	A community dinner prepared as closely to kosher rules as possible.	Men and women	Separation between men and women in duties and during dinner.	Red meat is avoided, as it is difficult to obtain food that has been certified kosher.

Source: Information was derived from participatory observation and field notes.

Women generally made the ritual preparations and were concerned about the punctuality of the ceremony. This is contrasted with other branches of Judaism—Reform, Conservative, and Constructivist—where there is no separation during service and duties are not divided by gender.

During the service, the men had access to their prayer book, which made a key difference. Their prayer book was different from that of the women, being thicker and more extensive. The Women's Book also specified its audience on its cover, using soft colors and a rose for decoration. The researchers used this book in the candle ceremony, which was provided by the community leader.

Unlike other Jewish communities, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, the Shabbat service at Ohr Chaim did not include a sermon. This is because there was no rabbi to permanently lead the community. In fact, a pair of American and Israeli rabbis visit the community once a year. Members guide themselves or depend on the most senior member to guide services. However, there is no period reserved for the interpretation and discussion of the Torah.

It was not possible to measure how the presence of the researchers affected the behavior of the community. However, this did not mean that they were treated as external agents and prohibited from participating in the most significant Shabbat rituals. Hand washing, which has a purifying element and is a blessing, was outstanding in the experience. The women helped in the process,

explaining the correct method of washing hands, pointing out the correct prayer, and enforcing the obligation to remain silent before receiving the bread and wine.

2.4.2. Shabbat dinner

The women asked the researchers for help serving dinner, which had been previously prepared by them. Meat cannot be prepared with dairy or consumed by Jews under religious law. Properly butchered beef is not available in Honduras. Fish was prepared as the main protein accompanied by a salad of lettuce, tomato, beet, rice and corn tortillas. The food was no different from what many Honduran families eat regularly.

The men set up two tables in the outside area in opposite corners to maintain gender separation. The women served the men dinner on paper plates and plastic cutlery before retiring to their own table. The men oversaw cleaning up at the end of dinner. During the meal, the women expressed that they were happily surprised to see other women in the synagogue and were open and frank in conversation.

They described their experience living under religious law and shared instances of social isolation and discrimination in their lives. One of the two women faced discrimination in a public school. After that incident, she learned to keep her religious identity a secret. She explained that it is a practice that most Ohr Chaim members have adopted to avoid rejection. The social

isolation experienced goes beyond explicit discrimination.

Social and academic life at the public university of San Pedro Sula meant having to choose between social and academic activities or following religious law. Many events, including some academic ones, were often held in Christian churches. An Orthodox Jewish prospect cannot enter churches, since it is a religion originally founded on idolatry. These activities sometimes also take place during Shabbat.

The discreet and protective nature prevalent at Ohr Chaim is not out of the ordinary for Orthodox Jews around the world. However, protective measures are different in San Pedro Sula due to the size of the congregation. The members come from different parts of the city and from different socioeconomic classes, the only thing that unites them is their religious convictions. Other shared spaces are not available for their use and comfort, such as cultural and recreational centers, schools, supermarkets, among others.

3. Discussion

In this study, the most significant finding was the practice and fulfillment of rituals for the identity of Ohr Chaim, a Jewish Orthodox synagogue in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Being made up entirely of future converts, their adherence to religious law is the only thing that ties them to Jewish identity. No religion can be practiced in isolation, but unlike Christianity there is no single belief, such as being saved by Christ, that gives a convert his or her religious identity. Judaism needs a community, a minimum number of people to pray. This is especially true in the context of converts, the Hebrew term literally translating to immigrant. The Jewish perspective is not about adopting a truth, but is a migration from one culture to the other.

Jews born into the tradition have other connections to their culture outside of religious practice. This allows them to relax their level of attachment to religious law, since their level of observance will never take away their identity. Their identity is anchored in the fact of having family, history, traditions, cultural productions and sometimes even language. It is understandable why Ohr Chaim members are attracted to the Orthodox branch. Shared rituals and practices are the glue that keeps them united to their religious identity, confirming the work of researchers cited in this study (Durkheim, 1912; Geertz, 2013; Zylberberg, 2002).

4. Conclusion

The inclusion of the researchers within the Shabbat service was an important first step in establishing the relationship between them and the community. Participatory observation was essential. Deep

conversations would not have been carried out without participatory observation. Also, the opportunity was opened to understand and describe how communal practices and rituals shape the identity of Ohr Chaim.

The value of a standpoint epistemology was confirmed, as it was a shared identity that enabled participation in Shabbat. There was a degree of trust when the researcher shared identity and was able to understand the subjects from a religious and cultural perspective. This first visit to Ohr Chaim served to establish a point of contact. In this experience, participatory observation had more value as a trust-building tool than as an information collection method.

5. Author Contributions

AKMD contributed to the literature review, concepts, field visit and observations. LACA contributed to the literature review, concepts, field visit and observations, writing and editing the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the latest version of the manuscript.

6. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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