CHAPTER SIX

ON MORISCO NETWORKS AND COLLECTIVES

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The latest historiographical reviews of the Morisco question agree that research into this sixteenth-century Spanish minority has flourished in the past thirty years. In contrast to the traditional focus on the Conversos, this abundance of historiographical research on the subject of Moors converted to Christianity is relatively recent.¹ There are a number of reasons for this development, but one of the results is that it is only in the past few years that we have finally been able to appreciate the extraordinary complexity of the Morisco question in all its political, social, cultural and religious dimensions. Far removed from the traditional, erroneously generalizing, approaches, a new image is gradually gaining ground in which the Moriscos are seen to be a diverse and bustling community with a wide range of life choices—an image that is a permanent challenge to classical accounts of the issue. This applies not only to the definitions that emerged at the time of the Moriscos in Spain, but also to the historiographical theories that have developed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²

Of all the images of the Moriscos which circulated in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hispanic society, in which the Moriscos were seen as a unified collective,³ one of the most widely held was that, as a group, the Moriscos were perpetually engaged in conspiracies to bring down Spain. Be it in league with the enemies of the monarchy—the French, Protestants, Berbers or Turks—or on their own initiative, the Moriscos were

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* Translated by Nicola Stapleton.
accused, not only of persisting in their Muslim faith, but of conceiving sinister plots that would inevitably lead to an uprising by that minority.

After several centuries of dignified survival,\(^4\) this view has finally been challenged by modern scholars, who have clarified the actual scope of the alleged conspiracies. Having found the effective range of such actions to be, in fact, extremely modest, historians have been able to prove that what were considered plots were no more than gatherings of fellow Muslims that took place at night in private homes or isolated locations. Other than discussion of the religious and social circumstances of those present, these meetings would involve, at most, contacts of an exploratory nature with a view to small scale actions, as well as occasional, more or less appropriate, interventions extolling messianic or providential notions.\(^5\) In the same vein, specialists have accurately described how the authorities and well-informed individuals in general were never deceived as to the true scope of these activities. As Gregorio Colás points out with reference to the Aragon area:

Conspiracies, contacts with the enemies of the monarchy and rearmament are commonplace topics in a historiography ridden with clichés, irrespective of ideology or chronology. At all events, today we find ourselves in a position to call into question some of the facts that were hitherto considered indisputable. (…) The first accounts of conspiracies date from 1569. They start to gain substance in 1577 and come to an end in 1579–1581. The leading figures indicted in the 1579–1581 trials pleaded guilty, after the customary interrogations, to practicing Islam, but none of them admitted to charges of treason or conspiracy.

(…) Despite its vast resources, the Inquisition was unable to substantiate these allegations, although it did manage to rid itself of a significant number of eminent Moriscos around this time. The conspiracies start as a rumor and gradually gain credibility in the course of interrogation, in which the accused are at pains to mention any interview, contact, letter, money, weapon, soldier, or indeed anything at all, that might help them avoid torture or please their inquisitor. At the end of the day, it all comes to nothing.

(…) One of the few members of the political class who was acquainted with the real situation of the Moriscos in Aragon, Bernardo de Bolea, always

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