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ScholarWorks Citation

Kapur, P., & Misra, G. (2013). Transmission and regeneration of Sikh self: Culture in the making. In Y. Kashima, E. S. Kashima, & R. Beatson (Eds.), *Steering the cultural dynamics: Selected papers from the 2010 Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.4087/FSAF8670>

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Transmission and Regeneration of Sikh Self: Culture in the Making

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Abstract

The Sikh cultural narrative was explored using social representations in the public sphere. To this end textual analysis of newspaper articles (N=200) published from January 2003 to April 2005 was done. These analyses addressed four major domains: religio-cultural, political identity, contemporary trends, and redressing self-perception. The emerging themes evinced negotiation for creating a distinct space within the multicultural society of India. The task of putting one's self-identity together, of making it coherent and presenting it to others as 'their culture', was warranted for making the boundaries of their community distinct from other existing groups. Bonding with the group emerged as the main source of motivation at the individual and community levels to assert a community's identity.

The relationship between self and culture is both intricate and complex. When we avidly search for their linkages, we tend to lose sight of the ability and adroitness with which individuals and their collectivities mould and fashion them and their cultures. Slow and steady, and hence often unobserved, are the individual and collective responses to contexts; the action in the form of resistance and struggle which takes place in everyday life. Thus the 'making of culture' needs to be explored in the context of meaning at both the symbolic level as well as in the concrete embodiments in which the self is able to cast itself. In the process of 'making culture' we are also 'making ourselves' vis-à-vis in the face of pressures and circumstances (Fox, 1985). Cultures are also transmitted because without the transmission and regeneration of the group's culture the community would cease to exist (Helweg, 1999). Against this backdrop and by referring to the case of Sikh community, the present study brings to the fore the argument that culture is to be viewed not only as a set of rules, but also as the internalized habits, life styles and skills that allow humans to continually produce innovative actions that recreate it.

The Sikh community has its origin in the 15th century as a local religion in Punjab, India. The word 'Sikh' comes from the Sanskrit word 'shishya' meaning disciple, learner. As the youngest religion worldwide the Sikh community's strong presence is noticeable both at the national and international level, even though they are just 20 million worldwide and only 1.8% of the Indian population. Since the emergence of the Sikh community from Guru Nanak (1469-1539), founder of the Sikh community, the need for self definition and representation of Sikh identity has been persistent and a perennial concern. This study illustrates how the Sikh community seeks strategic advantage by using culturally coded skills.

Method

This work derives its data mainly from *The Tribune*, a daily newspaper which is published in Chandigarh in north India. With its English and Punjabi editions, *The Tribune* covers topics of relevance to the Sikh and Punjabi community. It has reflected the affairs of Punjab for the last 126 years. The daily newspaper along with the week-end supplements covers wide-ranging topics of political, social, religious and cultural nature, as well as publications and articles by the Punjabi community. Information germane to the subject was also gathered from *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu*.

The articles examined from *The Tribune* and other newspapers/magazines spanned a period of two years, from January 2003 to April 2005. The length of the articles ranged from 100 to 600 words. Various types of texts were identified and analyzed, namely, daily columns, editorials, celebrations of cultural events, issues of significance to the Sikh community, and letters to the editors.

The daily newspapers along with weekend supplements were scanned and texts of thematic relevance were identified. First, each text was categorized in terms of broad themes. Each text was thoroughly studied and categorized according to its contribution to the making/transmission/regeneration of culture. Details of the emergent categories with relevant examples of 'culture making' and 'cultural regeneration' are discussed in the next section. The analysis revealed continuous attempts by the Sikh community to negotiate a distinct space for itself. The analysis yielded four major categories: religio-cultural issues (110), political power and social identity (58) contemporary trends (22), and redressing self images of the community (12).

Results

Religio-Cultural Issues

This category yielded the largest single group of texts. This clearly indicates the concern of the Sikh community with its religious beliefs, customs, traditions, in short, the core of the Sikh self. For analytic purposes the texts were further divided into smaller meaning /theme units. The emergent thematic categories and their descriptions are presented below.

1. Emergence of the need to educate and enhance the awareness of Sikhs as a community at the national and international level.
2. Introduction and innovation in transmission of Sikh religion and culture to its adherents.
3. Definition and use of sacred space to define self and culture through the construction of museums, memorials, places of worship, and educational institutions.
4. Celebrations and remembering the past at national and international levels, in the form of festivals, commemorations, birth and death anniversaries of the ten Gurus. This aspect reflects the domain of social memory. A well-known and accepted way of making the presence of a community felt has been through marches, rallies, lectures, conferences and, exhibitions.

Political Power and Social Identity

Some political issues regarding the Sikh community have hit the headlines both at the national and international level. At the national level issues included political presence, internal power struggles and control of the Sikh political parties, and religio-political activities. The latter are related to Sikh identity and its definition, that is, the *Sikh Code of Conduct* and internal struggles of power and factionalism. At the international level the issues ranged from the right to maintain Sikh symbols for Sikhs residing in a foreign land. For example, the French Government's ban on wearing the Sikh turban as an external symbol of religious identity has evoked a strong reaction from the Sikh community worldwide, as well as at the national level. In some countries such as Canada, USA and UK the Sikh communities have formed their own political parties and have won seats in the respective Governments.

Contemporary Trends: Making of an Imagined Community

This category emphasizes the use of modern information technology to keep in touch with the growing numbers of Sikhs, at the national and international levels. The critical concerns voiced included the following: need to educate, keeping abreast with the latest developments in the political, religious and social world of the Sikh community, mobilization of the community on key matters and most importantly, allowing Sikh people to voice their individual concerns. The Internet allows communication through web sites, online chat rooms, e-mail, net to phone provisions, e-newsletters, and the like. This is perhaps leading to the construction of a new Sikh consciousness through 'virtual *sangats*' or a virtual network enabling a dialogue. This facilitates the creation of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991).

Religio-Cultural Issues: Regeneration and Transmission of Culture

Sikh Studies and Academic Programmes. The growth and development of Sikh studies both in India, mainly in universities of Punjab, and particularly in the Western universities is an indication of how the Sikh community has used the academic field to register a concern for cultural identity (Barrier, 2004; Shackle,

Singh, & Mandair, P. Singh, 2004). While this move has yielded disagreements in interpretation, it has also made Sikhs recognized as a distinct community at the international level with close links to disciplines like sociology, anthropology, religious studies, history, gender studies, and literary studies in India, the USA, Australia, and the UK.

Translations of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS). Translations of the teachings of the Gurus and related literature into the languages of countries where there is a large following have become available ("Sri Adi Granth on Barcelona agenda", 2004). An ever-growing demand for *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, in foreign countries especially Canada has prompted the Canadian Sikh Committee to set up a modern printing press in Canada. It would be on the same patterns as the Golden Offset Press in Amritsar ("150 'birs' to be flown to Canada today", 2004). Bibi Jaspal Kaur translated the Holy Scriptures, like *Guru Granth Sahib*, '*Sukhmani Sahib*' and '*Panj Bani*' into Thai language. *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is also available in Spanish. *Japji* (a Sikh prayer) of Guru Nanak has been translated in Guarani, an indigenous language used in Southern Bolivia, northern Argentina and Paraguay ("And now Guru Granth Sahib in Spanish", 2003, March 30).

New Adherents. *The Tribune* ("And now Guru Granth Sahib in Spanish", 2003, March 30) reported that more than 130 locals in Asuncion, Paraguay learned yoga and practiced meditations from *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. They also attended *bhangra*, (Punjabi dance) lessons conducted alongside. Special functions of installation of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* were held in Paraguay and Buenos Aires in Argentina ("And now Guru Granth Sahib in Spanish", 2003, March 30). The translation of the Sikh scriptures is necessary because the Sikh community follows its faith, but speaks the local language. For example, *The Tribune* ("And now Guru Granth Sahib in Spanish", 2003, March 30) reports that Sikhs from Punjab were taken to Argentina by the British for construction of a railway line between Argentina and Bolivia. In the last 50 years this community has integrated with the locals and has a *Gurdwara* and engaged a Punjabi-speaking *granthi* (Sikh priest).

Editing the Sikh Scriptures. The SGPC (Sikh Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee) has initiated the re-editing of *Sri Gur Partap Suraj Parkash*, in a bid to remove the 'mythological content' from the text (Dhaliwal, 2004, December 8; Viridi, 2004, December 15) as it is in direct contradiction to the Sikh faith and ideology (Dhaliwal, 2004, December 8).

Cultural Construction of Ecology: Sacred Spaces and Construction of Self

Since the very beginning humans have demarcated certain spaces and deemed them as sacred in order to interact with Nature and negotiate an identity for themselves. The construction of museums, memorials, places of worship, and educational institutions offer ample illustration of materials that people erect to define self and culture. A sample of such periodic attempts, as reported in the newspaper, by the Sikh community is evidence of the notion of selfhood. To quote:

- A proposal to construct a memorial in the name of Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra, a well known political and Sikh leader. ("Memorial in name of Tohra", 2004).
- Demand for national memorial to be raised in the name of Banda Bahadur, a well known soldier and historical figure, at the historic Lohgarh Fort ("Memorial at Lohgarh" (2004).
- Request by Dal Khalsa, a Sikh political party, to raise the promised martyrs' memorial at Golden Temple to mark the 20th anniversary of Operation Bluestar ("Raise Bluestar martyrs' memorial, SGPC urged", 2004).
- SGPC has approached Centre for releasing a postal stamp on the occasion of the fourth centenary celebrations of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib ("SGPC to approach Centre for stamp", 2004).

These developments characterize an expression of the need to redefine the Sikh cultural self.

Political and Identity Issues

Language Related Issues: Demand for Second Language Status for Punjabi

Some of the important news items are as follows.

- Sikhs have reiterated their demand for the introduction of Punjabi as a second language in all schools of the state ("Second language status for Punjabi sought", 2004).
- The BJP government had in 1999 as part of the tercentenary celebrations of the birth of the Khalsa taken a

decision to introduce Punjabi in schools (“Second language status for Punjabi sought”, 2004).

- The Singapore Sikh Education Foundation has been working since 1990 to develop and get government approval for a 10-year curriculum. Punjabi (and Gujarati) is recognized as one of the official languages of Singapore. The Punjabi programme is now spreading to Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. (R. Singh, 2004).

It is also important to note that the Punjab State Language Act of 1967 ensures the use of Punjabi in government offices. (J. Singh, 2004).

Nanakshahi, the Sikh Calendar. A significant development for the Sikh community has been the release of the Sikh calendar, called *Nanakshahi* calendar by SGPC for the year 2004 (“Nanakshahi calendar dates announced”, 2003). This calendar starts from the year 1469, the birth year of Guru Nanak. In it, the Sikh New Year starts from the first day of the month of *Baisakh* (April-May) which is the day of spring festival in Punjab. The calendar also lists the birth and death anniversaries of the ten Gurus, the dates for festivals and other salient dates such as the installation of the Sikh scriptures, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and this calendar accepted by the State government of Punjab (“Nanakshahi calendar dates announced”, 2003; “Punjab holidays”, 2003). The codification of the annual calendar for any community is a mark of its uniqueness.

Frescos Whitewashed: Disappearance of Visual Evidence. Wall paintings of Hindu Gods including Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, which were unique specimens of the Sikh school of art, of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh era, have disappeared from the upper storey of *Sri Darbar Sahib*, at Tarn Taran, in Punjab. This Gurdwara was founded by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev in 1597 A.D. Apparently, the frescos of Hindu gods were erased during the ‘*kar seva*’ (volunteer social service) being carried out by Baba Jagtar Singh at the behest of the SGPC. Now all the 16 paintings which were revived belong to the Sikh Guru, Sikh warriors and religious leaders (“Frescos whitewashed”, 2003). It is reported that in 1971 the paintings depicted mixed themes, including portraits of Sikh Gurus and scenes from Hindu mythology.

Threat, Apprehension and Political Presence. Sikh community members who have settled abroad recognise a need to represent their religio-political presence in the place of current residence. Yet it takes on different negotiations depending upon the context. In Britain the Sikhs want an identity distinct from the ‘Indian’ identity, whereas, in Canada, political parties are approaching the Indian community in which Sikhs form an important part. In the process Sikh individuals are entering the Canadian political arena.

In post 9/11 New York, members of the Sikh community were mistakenly targeted as members of the Taliban because of their beards and turbans. Further, they were banned from carrying the kirpan, the ceremonial dagger, at airports. Thus as a fallout of September 11 the Sikhs have been at the receiving end of racist abuse and official scrutiny. The Sikh community, particularly in United States and Britain, desperately wants to make the residents of that country aware of their Sikh identity and educate them about the differences between Sikhs and Arabs. Keeping these in mind, the Sikhs of Britain launched a Sikh political party in September, 2003. They want to “...lobby the government and launch their own ‘agenda for change’ to improve their voice in government, particularly in education and religious rights” (from <http://news.bbc.co.uk> 13th September, 2003). The formation of a UK Sikh political party indicates the cohesiveness of the community and concern about maintaining visibility in a world with innumerable communities.

Diaspora: Endeavour to define self and Culture in New Contexts. The diaspora’s feelings and concerns are of immense importance if one is to understand Sikh self-construction today. Phase I was when the Sikh community migrated from India to various parts of the world. Phase II refers to the current period when those settled abroad are concerned that the future generations keep their traditions and customs intact in such times of change and modernity.

History in the Making: Some Contemporary Trends

At the official website of the SGPC, www.sgpc.sgpc.net believers can listen to live *kirtan* (renditions of hymns) from *Sri Harmandar Sahib* (Golden Temple). It gives the daily *hukamnama* of the Golden Temple; it also has details of the Sikh *Rehat Maryada*, the Sikh code of conduct. Another site is www.srigurugranthsahib.org. It provides information about the essence of Sikhism and its teachings. Bharat Sanchar

Nigam Limited (BSNL), a Government of India enterprise, provides the '*Mukhwak*' (*hukamnama*) from the Golden Temple everyday on the cell phone ("BSNL's Mukhwak service", 2003). The significance of *mukhwak*, is that it is a daily divine order given out from the SGGS everyday at the *Sri Harmandar Sahib* (Golden Temple) Amritsar, Punjab. The divine message is broadcast all over India and abroad. To ensure fast and effective communication with members of the Sikh community settled abroad or in remote parts of India, the SGPC has plans to start an e-mail service ("SGPC to upgrade communication system", 2004).

Online Debate on Sikh Identity: Trends toward Globalization. The topics of concern on the Internet revolve around – ritual, political history, the formation of the Khalsa, the meaning of Rahit, the role of women, the importance of the symbols especially the *kirpan* and unshorn hair. The purpose of such debate is to mobilize the community in the context of old and new problems faced by the community. The ban by the French Government on wearing religious symbols in public schools resulted in a signature campaign on the Internet. Sites are dedicated to the promotion of Sikhism and to reinforcing Sikh values and a strong sense of community (www.chardikala.com; www.punjabilok.com; www.sikhcybermuseum.org; www.khalsapride.com), to promoting Sikh businesses (www.sikhchamber.com, www.waheguru.com) providing a Sikh directory, and listing global daily news (www.sikhe.com).

Some Future Pointers. There is an attempt to use the Internet for distance learning and teaching. Now it is the age of the 'virtual *sangats*' (community, Mandair, 2001; I.J. Singh, 2001) where interactions take place between peers or even strangers who are closely connected because of a common, shared concern. The chat rooms have the added advantage of allowing anonymity; a Sikh individual can voice his/her concern and take an active part in debating various topics. Thus, there is a wide canvas for the community to respond to the changing circumstances.

Correction of Self-Perceptions: Self to be defined by Community

Culture in the making also considers the necessary 'corrections' of the perceptions of its community members, as well as others, as to who they are and what they represent. By doing this people record their dissent and set the record straight, by stating what their culture, heritage and tradition really 'is'. It involves voicing their concern at that opportune moment.

Where is the Temple? The holy shrine of the Sikhs will henceforth not be called 'Golden Temple' as it has been popularly known till now. Evidently the name 'Golden Temple' was adopted during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh when he had the original shrine covered with gold. Now it is to be called 'Shri Harmandar Sahib' or 'Shri Darbar Sahib', and use of any other name will attract action, says the SGPC, the apex Sikh body. The reason behind this change of name is that the "expression 'Golden Temple' is creating confusion about Sikh religion" (Walia, 2004). Apparently the term 'temple' was being mistaken as "a place of worship for Hindus". The new names are appropriate as these are the names used by the Sikh community.

Portrayal of Self-Image by Media. More evidence concerning feelings of harm to self-images comes from an incidence when Sikh demonstrators stormed a theatre in Central England to protest against the play, *Behzti*, meaning dishonour, which showed sexual abuse and murder in a Sikh place of worship, the *gurdwara* ("Sikhs try to storm theatre in UK", 2004; Ahmed, 2004). Sikhs have often protested against erroneous depictions of their faith. A popular soap opera aired on television titled *Des Mein Nikla Hoga Chand* showed a Sikh with a flowing beard performing a fire ritual in utter disregard to Sikh principles. Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) general secretary Ravinder Singh Khurana said that performing a fire ritual was an act prohibited in Sikhism. They would seek an unconditional apology from the serial makers ("Sikhs protest against write-up in magazine", 2004). Thereafter, a code for film and serial makers was established. A non-Amritdhari artist could not play the role of an *Amritdhari* (Baptized Sikh) Sikh; neither could a Sikh be shown committing a crime or drinking liquor in films and serials. Advertisements on TV and characters in movies, depicting negative self-images of Sikhs, for example as simpletons or buffoons, are also objected to by Sikhs (Gill, 2003). The identity of Sikhs has often been distorted. "Despite over 300 years of existence as a hard working and enterprising community, Sikhs are still searching for an identity where cultural and political

clash points are resolved.” (“Sikhism suffers from negative stereotyping”, 2005, p. 4).

Conclusion

The present research has illustrated aspects of culture making and self construction as expressed in the way the Sikh community responds, reacts, innovates, transforms, and reinvents its core in the light of changing demands of the context. The task of putting one’s self-identity together, of making it coherent and presenting it to others as ‘culture’ requires constant and enduring attention and continuous alertness so that others do not transgress into that territory, so that boundaries are well defined and not permeable to outside infiltration and influence. A well-defined and unambiguous identity is essential to let oneself and others know who you are. At the same time, be broad minded and ready to invent or transform in the changed circumstances. Thus identity formation is the core cultural task (Clark, 2002).

Culture-making thus requires an investment of resources in terms of time, money and effort on the part of any community. Making and maintaining one’s culture is a persistent, unrelenting and an on-going process. It’s an activity, a task, which is evolving in everyday activities. Culture making is also selective; it picks what is required to give it value, meaning and worth and sheds the inessentials to remain an efficient and valuable system. It responds to contexts, lives and breathes, grows and evolves, and even makes and breaks itself. In this way self and culture are both living systems. Finally, culture appears as a dynamic and not a fixed entity. Its elements -members, practices, customs, technologies and artefacts – change over time. The processes of culture making involves creating, and maintaining a difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’. In the process communities weave and create these webs of culture.

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