Stereotyped Sikh Images in Diaspora:

Public Portrayals and Citizenry Identity Politics

In August 2012 the fatal shootings of the faithful at a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, USA created a moment to reflect on the perception of Sikhs outside of India. An anthropological examination of public media photography amongst the commentariat during that time and in longer-term literature found that Sikhs are portrayed using very specific images that are not entirely representative of the community's "super-diversity". In locating this typesetting, it was found that colonial Orientalism may have lent historical origins to this image through a Victorian public attracted to the exotic in empire. As misleading and polemic as this representation may be, it has now been adopted by those on the other side of the camera i.e. parts of the Sikh community itself. Mass print-publishing and the internet has now become a proxy global platform for vying interests within the community seeking authority through this self-reflective image alignment. Literature linking publicly circulated images to identity in non-dominant groups suggests that this may have the dynamic of determining the actions of less informed or extreme groups such as white supremacists or newer members of the community such as Sikh youth. This in-situ researcher also considers whether this 'self-profiling' erroneously narrows the perception of the Sikh community by other, thereby affecting the equal appreciation of Sikhs as citizenry in diaspora.

"I speak Spanish to God, Italian to my wife and German to my horse"

Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, Spain: 1516CE

(Starkey: 2004)

The *American Broadcasting Corporation* (ABC) website carried a story regarding the funerals of the victims of the tragedy in Wisconsin five days earlier, noting that that the victims were to be "buried" [1]. In the vigils kept thereafter the popular media images were of those Sikhs that visibly displayed the Sikh "look"[2]. Around about the same time in Britain, the BBC aired an Olympics broadcast featuring a turbaned and bearded Sikh male wearing a GB branded shirt. The popular image of a '*kalasingha'* (Sikh male from East Africa) is that of Makhan Singh with a white turban and beard – a '*sardar'*[3]. Typing the words "the Sikh image" into the internet search portal *Google* also returns similar images to those above[4].

Contrastingly, the Briton Piara Singh Kabra created Sikh history in 1992 by being elected to the House of Commons; his clean-shaven image is seldom selected as 'Sikh'. Ruby Dhalla, the Canadian Parliamentarian for Brampton-Springdale is also an under-utilised image of Sikhs – female or otherwise. Dalip Singh Saund, the first Sikh member of the US Congress is not popularly held up as an image of a Sikh. Could this narrow representation of the community be a reason why the death ceremony of a century-old American community was misreported?

1 Website, *http://a.abcnews.com*, accessed 20th August 2012.

2 Gell, Singh (1996) uses Guru Gobind Singh and Dalip Singh to support the use of this term.

3 See Patel, Zarina, *Unquiet: The life and times of Makhan Singh*, Nairobi: Zand Graphics, 2006.

4 Website, *http://www.google.co.uk,* accessed 21st September 2012.

The current popular media image of Sikhs tends to be represented by a 'Khalsa Sikh'[5] male such as that of Fauja Singh; the British marathon runner. The less popular Sikh female images are shown wearing the traditional Punjabi dress; *chunnis* and *salwar kameez.* Many of these images can be traced back to medieval Punjab and are found in Sikh religious literature and art including Guru Nanak's *Janamsakhis* and portraits by Sobha Singh[6]. However, they are not inimitably 'Sikh'. As a context, they bear similarities to images and narratives of the general Punjabi populace in Victorian literature (e.g. Steinbach: 1845, Cunningham: 1849 and Eden: 1872).

The possibility of an incorrectly simplistic image of Sikhs in diaspora exists; it is one that is currently 'iconised' via the internet. This process could also determine how others conceptualise, evaluate and 'treat' the Sikh group in diaspora. Research on minority groups such as African-Americans connects images and information in the public domain to the creation of an incorrect identity[7]. Using this, it is proposed that an erroneous perception could carry the additional freight of misinforming extreme interests to act violently the minority group. Inter-group identity politics reinforces further the position that singularised Sikh images could create prejudicial profiling along racial, national, religious and gender lines. If this is accepted then an association between publicised identity and its misinterpretation by fringe parties with predetermined end-goals such as white supremacy becomes a possibility.

5 See Jakobsh (2004).

6 These images were created in the 1950s and are present in many Sikh homes today. See amongst others, Mcleod W.H., *Popular Sikh Art*, OUP, Delhi, 1992.

7 See amongst others Oney, Cole and Sellers (2011), Cerula (1997) and Adams (2012).

In understanding the reasons for the existence of this Sikh image, one observation is that individuals and groups within the Sikh community could, by projecting an undemocratic image of a Sikh, be 'self-profiling'. For example Gell, Singh (1996: 38) suggests that "...most British Sikh boys spend their school years enduring taunts of 'bubblehead' "... – the use of the word "most" would appear to challenge the "super-diverse" Sikh diaspora[8]. Other examples can be found in public images of Sikh soldiers, Sikh youth, and on websites such as *Sikhnet* and *Sikhs in Europe*. Nesbitt (2009) amongst others has evidenced that this is a "utopian" image that is seldom pursued by those who broadcast its attainment. Some commentators also suggest that this process may be fuelled by local political agendas[9].

The historical origin of Sikh images as well as contemporary identity politics can be used to understand the popularity of the current "Sikh look". First is the notion of the Sikhs as a 'martial race' [Wallace (in Singh, P: 2011)] as represented by the 1854 Winterhalter portrait of Dalip Singh[10]. Next is the concept of Sikh identity formation as a reflective 'otherness' can also be considered (Jaspal, R: 2012).

8 Super-diversity refers the layers of differentiation within a community such as country of origin and language (Vertovec: 2007). "Super-diversity" in the British Sikh community has been explored by the likes of Takhar and Nesbitt in Singh, P (2011), Singh and Tatla (2006) and Rusi Jaspal (2012).

9 Singh and Tatla (2006) note the connection between media and the race for authority between factions within the community.

10 Singh, Gell (1996: Fig 1. pg. 41). The young Prince is wearing a turban and with a beard and sword. This may exemplify the image of Sikhs in Victorian Britain.

Sikhs as a Martial Race

Some of the earliest recorded Western images of Sikhs have been those from the Punjab in the 19th century that narrate Sikhs as a martial race[11]. Sikh religious history also contains concepts with inherent militancy such as *miri-piri* and *degh-tegh fateh*[12]. Both could also be considered as precursors to the formation of the *Khalsa* and its associated militancy in 1699[13]. Research has also shown that a disproportional representation of Sikhs exists in armed forces worldwide[14]. In Britain this has a colonial legacy of Sikh soldiers having served to the death[15]. Noticeably, Sikhs were the only religious group to mobilise with arms during the 2011 summer riots in London[16]. The celebration of *akali nihangs* is also well documented in books published on Sikhs[17]. The public media remembrance of *shaheeds* (martyrs) Bhagat Singh and Udham Singh also far exceeds that of other notable Sikhs such as Bhai Kahn Singh, Bhai Vir Singh or Master Tara Singh. Sikh religious identity has a significant component of violent struggle that is represented in many popular images of its members and can often gain overt prominence within the diaspora[18].

11 See Gardner (1898), Eden (1872) and Cunningham (1849).

12 See Mcleod (2009) for an explanation of these concepts.

13 Amongst the five articles of faith formalised at this ceremony was the *kirpan*; a scimitar.

14 See amongst others Hussain (2002), McCann (2011).

15 The *Battle of Saragarhi* is celebrated as the fact that Sikh Soldiers have never retreated in battle.

16 Website, *www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots*., accessed 21st Sept 2012 and fieldwork diary: Aug 2011: London, England.

17 See amongst others, Madra and Singh, *Warrior Saints: Three Centuries of the Sikh Military Tradition* (London: Tauris, 1999).

18 This may be because Sikhs are a relatively new minority in a 'host' community. See Mattausch, John, *Unsettled Strangers? British South Asians,* unpublished paper, July 2012.

Sikh Religious Identity as an Otherness

The Sikh identity has a significant 'definer' involving the community's rejection, acceptance and modification of the 'other'. The 'other' being religions existent in the Punjab at the turn of the 19th century as indicated by the 1898 Indian publication *"Hum Hindu Nahi Hai"* (We Are Not Hindus) by Bhai Kahn Singh. This reflective definition of identity was reciprocated in August 2012 through an electronic flyer that tried to differentiate between a Sikh and a Muslim[19]. Identifying oneself based on another's identity could project an ever shifting image of unbounded memes, practices and norms. This may contribute to a lack of understanding of Sikhs and explain the existence of a visually striking image that seeks to distance itself from other religions. This image does not, however, fully represent the diversity in the Sikh community.

Super-Diversity[20] in Sikhs

The discourse on the theoretical 'utopian Sikh' described earlier and the 'lived reality' could be assisted by the acceptance that a Sikh 'uni-identity' is unhelpful in understanding the Sikh community. Sikhs are diverse in areas such as religious practice, language and cultural memes. An example is the turban and hair. Sikhs can be categorised as *keshadhari*, *mona* or *shahajdari* depending on their treatment of hair. In many cases, both the hair and the turban can be considered articles of faith as well as secular (perhaps cultural) identity markers[21]. Even though history forms the basis of a communal identity, the contemporary Sikh individual's identity is

19 Website,*www.facebook.com/pages/VEERShivaj/;* accessed20thAugust 2012.

20 See Vertovec in Nesbitt (2011: 231) for "Super-Diversity" in Sikhs.

21 See Kaur, O (in Jacobsen and Myrvold: 2011) on the various groups associated with Sikhs such as Ravidassis and Valmikis

diversified by socialisation outside the diaspora. This particularly affects newer Sikhs.

The Effect on Sikh Youth

As Barrier (in Singh, P: 6: 2011) suggests Sikh youth "...will be central to the vitality of their faith and community..." Following incidences such as the Oak Creek shootings and the London riots of August 2011 it has been observed that many younger Sikhs question Sikhism due to the unrepresentative prominence given to it in the community's media image[22]. In some cases these youth explore being 'secular Sikhs' in an effort to disconnect from a stereotyped identity that could attract misinformed attention. This is a trend observed in some youth in London as they explore a secular *punjabiyat* identity that sets them apart from what they consider is the community's divisive system of organisation such as gurdwaras, the caste system and gender separateness[23]. Language, music, food, literature, art and poetry within Sikh identity are, in the main, overlooked by these youth.

Conclusion

The fatal shootings of August 5th in Wisconsin may have created a nexus for introspection within the Sikh diaspora. The Sikh community abroad is often misunderstood by both its 'host' community as well as its own youth. As Gell, Singh (1996:38) notes "the Sikh appearance has become the threshold between being "Sikh or not". Sikh history, both religious and secular, supports the finding that the current public image is a narrow representation of Sikh identity. It is being utilised by individuals and groups within the Sikh community competing for authority. This

22 The mobilisation of Sikhs in London at gurdwaras in August 2011 may reflect the close link between Sikhism and Sikh identity for these youth.

23 Field work diary: June-Aug 2011: London: England.

phenomenon is not in isolation as several other ethno-religious groups such as the Muslim and Jewish communities are also typecast within the media. Unravelling this stereotyping and better representing the diversity within the community could help avoid a "Sikh" being called a "sheik" as US Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney did[24]. As global (particularly online) media helps "shape Sikh identity and mobilisation" (Singh, Pashaura: 2011: 6) it is Sikh youth whose identity politics that will be most affected. Sikh "super-diversity" may mean that these youth may have to speak German to their horses one day. Just like citizens.

24 Website, *http://www.washingtonpost.com/* accessed 3rd October 2012.

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