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Imaginary Journeys

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Laura Hirven etnologian väitöskirja *Identities in Practice. A Trans-Atlantic Ethnography of Sikhs in Finland and California* tarkastettiin 18.1.2013 Jyväskylän yliopistossa. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori Laura Huttunen Tampereen yliopistosta ja kustoksena professori Laura Stark Jyväskylän yliopistosta.

When I began studying ethnology two kinds of motivational forces drove me to do so. On the one hand, I was intrigued by cultures and the great human potential for creativity that I saw reflected in them. Ethnology, as I perceived it, gave me an opportunity to learn more about the alternative ways that human beings have come up with for being in this world and making sense of it. On the other hand, I chose to study ethnology because I was eager to make this world an even better place to live in. The way I see that ethnologists are doing this is by sharing the insights and understandings – however partial – that they have gained from studying the everyday life of ordinary people. In this vein, ethnologists work towards the aim of raising people’s sensibilities towards seeing and respecting the many different ways in which one can go about navigating through life. Trying to reach a deeper understanding of and respect for the various ways in which people may live their lives is essential in a world where more and more people with different cultural backgrounds are moving closer and closer together.

We all have to deal in our daily lives constantly with the question of whom we are and who we want to be in relation to others. It is a continuous process of shifting and swaying between positions that we would like to claim and positions that others want to ascribe to us. But the experience of leaving one place and settling down in another location that initially may appear very strange can bring the question of “who am I?” to the fore in a much more pressing manner. To explore in more detail how immigrants and their children negotiate their identities, I chose as my case study Sikh immigrants from the Punjab in Northern India.

Ethnologists usually share their findings in the form of a written text, such as the one that constitutes my dissertation which I am here to defend today. Reading the written ethnographies of other scholars, I often feel as if I have been given the unique chance to travel as a silent passenger who suddenly begins to see the world through the eyes of the ethnographer. In a similar vein, in this lecture today I would like to embark with you – using words and photographs – on an imaginary journey, at the end of which you, the travelers, will hopefully know more than you did before about Sikhs in Finland and in California.

In my dissertation, the particular question I was eager to examine in more detail was how Sikh immigrants and their descendants negotiate their identities and how this process is reflected in the practices that they conduct in everyday life. Sikhs belong to the religion called Sikhism, which was founded by Guru Nanak in the 15th century. They believe in one god and gather for collective worship in a Sikh temple called a *gurdwara*. At the *gurdwara*, Sikhs listen to readings from their holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and to the performance of *kirtan*, devotional music. At the temple, Sikhs also consume the sweet tasting *prashad*, which is a food that they consider to be blessed. Further, all visitors to the *gurdwara* are invited to eat food from the communal kitchen called a *langar*. Usually, it is volunteers who have prepared the food in advance as an act of selfless service called *seva*. Following the teachings of Sikhism, during the *langar* all people should sit next to each other on the floor as equals while eating their food. For Sikh immigrants in Finland as well as in Yuba City, the *gurdwara* plays an important role in the process through which Sikhs maintain but also re-fashion their identities. (Hirvi 2010)

Due to their long migration history and their vast global dispersion, Sikhs provide an especially interesting case study for exploring the impact of the migration experience on people's lives. What makes this study innovative with regard to the larger context of migration studies is the contrast it provides between experiences at two Sikh migration destinations. Using an ethnographic approach, this study juxtaposes the experiences of self-identified Sikhs living in Helsinki (Finland) and Yuba City (California). Yuba City's first Sikh settlers arrived at the beginning of the 20th century and worked initially on farms. Today, they make up an estimated ten per cent of Yuba City's total population of roughly 65,000 inhabitants. In contrast, the first Sikhs started to arrive in Finland at the beginning of the 1980s and today there are an estimated 600 Sikhs living in Finland, mostly in the metropolitan area of Helsinki.

The data for this dissertation was gathered through ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Helsinki and Yuba City from spring 2008 to spring 2012. Altogether I interviewed more than 60 Sikhs and did participant observation at their religious temples and at socio-cultural events such as birthday parties. I also visited Sikhs at home and at their work place in order to gain a better sense of the social contexts that influence their everyday lives. As I gradually realized while doing fieldwork amongst Sikhs in Helsinki, a great majority of Sikh immigrants work in bars and restaurants, either as employees or as entrepreneurs. Working in bars and restaurants has developed into an established path through which Sikhs access the Finnish labor market (Hirvi 2011). The Sikhs whom I interviewed for this study often stated that

their workplace provided them with a good opportunity to mingle with ethnic Finns and to improve their Finnish language skills.

What caught my attention in Finland, but also in California, was that many of the Sikhs I talked to emphasized in their interviews their ethic of hard work. Through this particular kind of speech act, as I have argued in my dissertation, they refer to their religious background that stresses in its teachings the importance to work for what you eat. Besides constructing for themselves a religious identity, Sikhs who use performative utterances that refer to their hard work ethic also seek to carve out positive identity positions for themselves in their respective contexts of settlement. Through these speech acts, they claim to be recognized as “good” people in the context of their new home countries – Finland and the United States – where hard work ethics are highly valued. In other words, I argue that when Sikhs’ stress their ethic of hard work, this not only serves as a strategy to construct the identity of a good Sikh but simultaneously functions as a tool through which they seek to identify themselves with the position of a good immigrant and good Finn/ or American.

A desire to gain a respected position in their new home countries that would be in harmony with their religious identities is also reflected in many practices that Sikhs perform in relation to the Sikh parade that annually takes place in Yuba City. The purpose of this religious ritual procession is to bring God’s message through the singing of divine hymns (*kirtan*) to the city (*nagar*). The parade is lead by a main float on which Sikhs’ holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is placed, and which is followed by numerous other floats as well as a flock of walking people. Most of the participants are Sikhs, but also a few non-Sikhs mingle in the crowd to observe this cultural spectacle that each year receives a lot of attention in the local media. Indeed, many Sikhs think that one important purpose of the parade is to perform their identities in front of fellow non-Sikh Americans. As one of the Sikhs whom I interviewed explained, one of the reasons why Sikhs arrange the parade in Yuba City is:

[...] to advertise to the wider community as well, that we are the Sikhs, but we are Sikh Americans, though, so it is a vehicle to build bridges and understanding to the wider community as well.

For example, the flags that are carried in front of the whole parade can be seen as an assemblage of symbols that visually communicate a desire to be seen as Sikh Americans. There is the American flag next to the Californian flag followed by numerous Sikh flags. The combination of these flags at this public Sikh procession can be interpreted to represent Sikhs’ eagerness to communicate that they are a distinct religious community but simultaneously part of California and the American nation.

The impact of the larger cultural context surrounding the parade in Yuba City is also reflected in the food that Sikhs offer for free during this event. This means that not only do Sikhs serve traditional Indian food along the way, such as rice with *chapatti* and vegetables, but they also offer a vast range of mainstream “American” food, like popcorn, French fries, nachos, or pizza. During the festivities, however, people perform their identities through bricolage practices, not only in relation to food but

also in relation to dress. Especially the dressing practices of male Sikh youth reveal a mixture of cultural elements deriving from the larger American context and those of their ancestral heritage. During the weekend, one can see, for example, young Sikh men who follow hip-hop fashion by wearing baggy trousers, loose fitting T-shirts and gold necklaces. But in terms of jewelry their so-called “bling-bling”, in other words, flashy hip-hop style jewelry and accessories, do not display the sign of the US dollar but instead the *Khanda*, which is an important Sikh religious symbol. Thus through their dressing practices, these young Sikh men weave their religious background into the language of the subcultural style with which they want to identify.

Others engage in the play of constructing identities by wearing particular kinds of shirts. At the parade in 2009, I saw, for example, one teenage boy who wore a shirt that had the same bright blue color as a Superman outfit. In front was the *Khanda* displayed in red on a yellow background inside a diamond-like shape imitating the “S” worn by Superman on his chest, while on the back of the T-shirt were the words “Supersikhi”. The teenager wore this piece of clothing over a ceremonial outfit consisting of a long white shirt, a blue cloth wrapped around his hips like a belt, and a dark blue turban orbited by a white cloth, with the *kirpan* (ceremonial sword) peaking below his “Supersikhi” T-shirt. He created his own playful version of how a contemporary young Sikh living in the United States looks when celebrating his religious traditions in public.

To conclude, I hope that this small detour into my dissertation research has left the traveler with a heightened sense of the manifold and creative ways in which people negotiate their identities. I also hope that my dissertation helps to enlarge our understanding of the different ways in which people in Finland and in California go about living their everyday lives. Further, I hope that as a whole, this research will enhance our understanding of how migration can function to accelerate cultural change, when immigrants and their descendants function as agents who participate in the shaping of the cultural worlds that surround and inform their everyday lives. One Sikh woman whom I interviewed, who moved to Yuba City as an adult, expresses her consciousness of the power of human agency by saying: “I think it is the people themselves who make all those rules. We can blame the culture, we can blame the atmosphere, whatever, but it is up to the people to change it [...]”. With these words I would like to end this journey. Thanks for traveling with me.

Literature:

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