

**OXFORD RESEARCH IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

---

**ABSTRACTS OF THESES  
IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
FOR WHICH DOCTORATES WERE AWARDED  
BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD IN 1999**

JAGBIR JHUTTI, A Study of Changes in Marriage Practices among the Sikhs of Britain.

By settling in Britain permanently, the Sikh community, like other ethnic minorities, attracted considerable interest. Studies in the 1970s and early 1980s focused on the prospect of a complete acculturation of ethnic minorities to British society. A 'cultural conflict' resulting from children being trapped 'between two cultures' was also expected.

This study, for which fieldwork and interviews were undertaken between 1993 and 1997, moves away from such assumptions when considering how and why the institution of arranged marriages among the Sikh community has continued in Britain. Although the study shows that British Sikhs remain committed to maintaining their long-established cultural and religious traditions, this does not imply that cultural and religious practices have remained static. The changes that have

*Editors' note:* The research theses in social and cultural anthropology listed here are those for which doctorates were awarded by the University of Oxford in 1999. The text of each abstract is as supplied by the author (though in one case the abstract has been shortened by the omission of all but the first three and last paragraphs). Those wishing to consult a particular thesis should apply to the Bodleian Library of the University or the British Library Lending Division (BLLD), which should be able to supply microfilmed copies or reprints on request.

been observed in Britain, particularly in the realm of arranged marriages, dowry-giving practices and the incidence of divorce, do not imply that Sikh traditions have been reconstructed just to accommodate the demands of their new environment.

In this study, no evidence of a complete assimilation into British society has been found. The study shows that rather than rejecting their cultural traditions, i.e. arranged marriages, second- and third-generation Sikhs have played an active role in maintaining such traditions. However, they are producing their culture rather than being produced by it, for they are actively constructing and maintaining their own separate identity. As a result, they are not 'lost' or 'culturally confused'. They can be seen as skilful 'cultural navigators' in Ballard's terms, who are actively involved in an ongoing and dynamic process of reworking the cultural and religious traditions that are available to them from their own culture, as well as the norms and customs of today's British society. Thus, they are committed to ordering their lives within their own cultural heritage but on their own terms, so that they enjoy the advantages of both worlds.

Thus, the study highlights that members of the Sikh community are not 'culturally confused' but are active participants who have successfully maintained a separate identity with regard to marriage. This has been achieved via a measure of gradual adaptation, by enculturating elements of British society, i.e. western conceptions of courtship and marriage celebrations, into their own traditions rather than a complete rejection of their own cultural practices.

A. K. LANGSLOW, *Between Rivers: The Postmodern Condition in a Totalitarian State*.

This thesis examines the relationship between structure and self on the basis of data gathered during fieldwork at Sichuan University in the People's Republic of China.

Structure and self are defined as mutually constituting processes, both of which synthesize rules and practice. The *creative interaction* of structure and self, that is, their mutual transformation, guarantees the continued relevance of one to the other. Even as they transform structure in practice, however, actors posit structure as external and stable, as they would otherwise lack reference points for self-construction.

The university is defined as a *totalitarian organization* and its structure is delineated. The totalitarian organization seeks to monopolize its members' self-constructions by limiting their access to *parameters of self-construction* outside its purview. Members of the totalitarian organization respond to restrictions and imposed parameters of self-construction by reinterpreting or circumventing them in

practice as well as by seeking out alternative parameters. Their unruly practice, however, on the whole helps to support the totalitarian structure rather than to undermine it.

The selves constructed in the *gap* between totalitarian rules and practice are profoundly ambiguous. The *hidden ambiguity* of rules helps actors to construct their selves with reference to imposed structure. The *exposed ambiguity* of rules, on the other hand, alienates actors from imposed structure. In addition, the totalitarian organization requires its members to perform in accordance with its rules. *Performance* can be variously interpreted by different actors and at different times and hence allows actors some creative input into imposed meanings. The official meaning embodied in performance, however, demands a degree of self-investment on the part of actors. Required performance therefore gives the totalitarian organization some hold over its members' selves.

Foreign teachers at the university confront the totalitarian organization's restrictions on their activities. Among the more subtle restrictions foreigners encounter is Chinese *culturalism*, which confers on foreigners a negative as well as a *positive stigma*. The restrictions imposed by the totalitarian organization as well as the ambiguity of totalitarian rules effectively prevent foreigners from interacting creatively with its structure and hence from establishing a place for themselves within it. The outsiders remain outsiders. Rather than adjust their self-constructions with reference to the parameters posited by the Chinese with whom they interact, foreigners continue to construct their selves with reference to familiar parameters and dismiss local ones as irrelevant to their selves, a self-protective strategy referred to as a *Cinderella complex*.

Chinese students studying English at the university are, unlike the foreigners, not in a position to disregard the *radically different* parameters of self-construction foreigners posit in interaction, as they experience those parameters as evidently relevant to their practice. English-language students at the university therefore incline to incorporate foreign parameters in their self-constructions, by questioning them as well as by adopting them. Their attempt to obtain foreign parameters of self-construction, however, runs into both Chinese and foreign significant and practical obstacles. The students are therefore relegated to the *periphery* of both Chinese culture and foreign culture, lacking both understanding and opportunity to interact creatively with respective structures.

In the totalitarian gap and at the periphery of two cultural processes, the students intimately confront discrepant sets of parameters of self-construction which they cannot dismiss or avoid and are thus propelled into the *postmodern condition*. Their response to the postmodern condition is subject to restrictions imposed by the totalitarian organization of the students' self-constructions. The students' resulting *multiple consciousness* expresses their need at once to adapt flexibly to diverse, conflicting, and changing structures *and* to hold fast to a sense of structure as something objective and stable so as to maintain a framework for self-

construction. The students' experience of the postmodern condition can, the thesis suggests, feed into postmodern theory.

RUSSELL LEIGH SHARMAN, 'With the Vision They See': Identity and Aesthetic Experience in Puerto Limón, Costa Rica.

This thesis examines aesthetic experience as it relates to the formation of cultural identity in the urban environment of Puerto Limón, Costa Rica. Based on twelve months of fieldwork, the thesis presents an analysis of aesthetics as a cross-cultural process of value attachment which, like identity, is founded on the dialectical relationship between the discursive realm of conceptual meaning and the non-discursive realm of lived experience.

The first of the two sections in the thesis shows how identity, as the dialectic between the ideal and the experiential, fits with the concept of a cultural aesthetic, where the discursive quality of art as a symbolic system is constantly negotiated by the non-discursiveness of aesthetic experience. The first section also introduces the city of Puerto Limón through a detailed history of its development, a presentation of the contemporary context, and an analysis of an emergent ideology of blackness.

The second section divides the aesthetic practices found in Limón into four principal forms: the built environment; canvas art and small crafts; music and performance; and literature. Chapter Four discusses the broad theme of the socialization of space and place in both the national and local contexts. Chapter Five examines a community of canvas artists who participate in constructing an ideal notion of Limónese identity. Chapter Six focuses predominantly on street bands known as *comparsas* to demonstrate the power of embodied experience to transform idealized notions of identity. Chapter Seven examines the substantial body of literature to come out of the province of Limón, and the split between women as poets and men as novelists.

Finally, the thesis offers a narrative by way of conclusion to demonstrate the complexity of presenting an ethnography of aesthetics and encourage further research in this area.

ANNETTE L. SNAPP, *The World of the Calusa*.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors which played a role in the isolation of the Calusa Indians of the Southwest Florida Gulf Coast after initial

Contact with Europeans. Isolation is viewed as the key which allowed the Calusa culture to survive for nearly two centuries following Contact.

The Calusa chiefdom, which had its beginnings in early prehistory, controlled all of the South Florida coast and jeopardized Spanish shipping in the West Indies due to the numerous shipwrecks on Florida shores. The Spanish sought to establish peace with the Calusa and their neighbours, but their efforts were useless.

The Spanish abandoned the Southwest Florida coast and moved to North Florida, where Indians who relied on agriculture could provide supplies for Spanish colonial settlements. Meanwhile, a deep period of isolation of the Calusa from the Spanish began. This isolation was supported by several factors, including: the geography of South Florida, the hostility of the Calusa and the effectiveness of native warfare technology, Spanish administrative policy in the New World, the lack of precious metals or other resources important to the Spanish, and the lack of Spanish support to colonial settlements in Florida. This isolation protected the Calusa from extended exposure to European diseases and the militarism associated with Spanish culture. But this only delayed their demise, as diseases and warfare led to their extinction by the mid-eighteenth century.

LORRAINE C. G. DA'LUZ VIEIRA, *Acupuncture in Oxford: The Role of Belief in Healing Practice* (2 vols).

This thesis examines the role belief plays in the process of healing. It is an ethnomedical study which investigates a cultural anomaly: the use of a non-Western healing practice, acupuncture, in a Western environment. Both the acupuncturists observed and the patients interviewed are all Westerners, and yet this is a form of healing which comes to us from China, where it has been practised for at least 3,000 years. Thus this form of healing and the acceptance of it by patients and their practitioners is described as a cultural anomaly.

Because of its unusual nature, acupuncture offers an ideal subject for the study of cultural dynamics, that is, the clinical interaction between the practitioner and the patient. What emerged in the research is a clear picture of the relationship which exists between a patient and a healer and its importance to successful healing.

The cultural beliefs which gave rise to this unique system of medicine, where a needle is used to make energetic and physiological changes in the body, is investigated. This is done by examining the cosmology, philosophy, science, theoretical foundations, perception of the human body, and methods of diagnosis and treatment that is the basis of acupuncture. Three acupuncturists are studied in detail and, since the study spans 20 years of fieldwork (the researcher is a practising

acupuncturist as well as an ethnomedical anthropologist), a large number of patients and treatments have been analysed.

[...]

This research makes a contribution to our understanding of how acupuncture works but, more importantly, why it works and why it is so 'successful' at the moment. The reader discovers why millions of people are turning to it as an alternative form of medicine.