

## Culture



# ***The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, by Harjot OBEROI, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 494 pages**

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The Skjønsberg and Vuorela chapters provide the detail for Section V, Efforts to Record Female Perspectives. Through diaries and story-telling women's, indeed people's, lives are portrayed. Skjønsberg tells how participatory research is not an alternative to existing social scientific research but a supplement. Participatory research widens our perspective, people informing people gives us a more accurate view of the diversity of social life. As she says, the "silent majorities" (like women who face more powerful groups) are given voice. Vuorela gives space for this voice in the engaging stories told by and about women in Msoga Village, Tanzania.

In the final Section Bryceson returns again to ask if we should bury the hoe as we note the transformations of agriculture in African life. What is to be acknowledged is that women wielding the hoe has not been displaced in the 'modernising' process. It endures, as a mainstay, perhaps as a last resort, but, "...given the individualized nature of hoeing as a physical activity, the hoe has, over time, offered women a means of supporting themselves and their dependents with or without male involvement" (p.269).

This volume contributes to the small but growing academic literature recognising African women's intelligence as well as their hard work as this is delineated in empirical data using participatory methods that include women's voices.

❖ *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, by Harjot OBEROI, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 494 pages.

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The changes of the nineteenth century ushered in by European science and military technology were remaking the world in fact as well as in the mind. In fact Britain had established preeminence on the Indian subcontinent. In mind it changed the way the colonized peoples would perceive themselves as well as the world around them. It is in this context that Harjot Oberoi writes about the tension between diversity of religious practice and the representation of a modern homogeneous Sikh identity in India. His central argument is that categories such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu were simply irrelevant to the religious life of the newly colonized peoples of the subcontinent. Religious life of the people in the pre-colonial period, he maintains, is best characterized as a continuum of overlap-

ping communal identities. Indeed categorizations such as Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and Sikhism took place in the nineteenth century. Oberoi asserts that the tidy category "Sikh" is a cultural construct resulting from a mixture of factors such as the impact of modernity, British colonization, the effective use of communications technology, and the desire of certain elite groups to purge their community of religious plurality.

Oberoi's description of the Sikh effort in the construction of a religious identity shares resonances with the struggles of other colonized communities worldwide to undertake reform of religious values and practices in the search for a relevant self-representation. Subjugation creates a deep anxiety among the colonized elites caused by strong feelings of religious and moral superiority juxtaposed against the fact of being a conquered people. Invariably this leads to critical self-examination through questioning of what went wrong and movement towards reform and a new self-representation. Indeed, amongst the Sikh, the process of self-examination and response to modernity began among the educated elite. In this sense *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* speaks to anyone who perceives that debilitating anxiety and is interested in the response of colonized peoples to the challenges of modernity.

Oberoi's argument echoes David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* in which he maintains that mankind oscillates between polytheism and monotheism, like a pendulum swinging from a pluralistic, ritual-oriented, oral tradition to a puritanical, scripturalistic, codified religious practice. Oberoi meticulously traces the movement of a plural Sikh framework, consisting of heterogeneous religious beliefs and practices, to the dominance of the Tat Khalsa "episteme" subordinating all other Sikh traditions. Attempts to force a people into separate and distinct breeds invariably leads to misrepresentations. The complicity of the British in the construction of the identity of the "marshal race" reveals the web of political motives necessary to produce categories such as the "Sikh".

It is noteworthy that Ernest Gellner in his *Muslim Society* argues that under modern conditions Hume's oscillating pendulum becomes unhinged and moves overwhelmingly towards a more protestant and less pluralistic version of religion. The mediating function of local saints is eroded by the colonial and post-colonial state. Atomised masses identify less with saints and more with a common national factor.

In this case the formation of a common Sikh ethnic and religious identity was facilitated by communications technology in reaching the rural masses. To his credit Oberoi weaves the ideas of Canadian thinkers such as Harold Adams Innis (implicitly) and Marshall McLuhan (explicitly) in explaining how print culture played a role in the creation of monopolies of knowledge and formulation of a Sikh identity. The injection of Canadian flavour adds to the analysis and enhances understanding of the complex set of factors contributing to the formation of Sikh identity. It also demonstrates shared experiences of Empire between the South and the North — a connection worthy of study but rarely explored by scholars in both hemispheres.

A question that lurks in the shadows while reading *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* is: if the construction of a single Sikh religious identity in the form of the Tat Khalsa in the late nineteenth century is reductive and void of the rich Sikh tradition, what is a valid representation of identity? How does one judge a valid from an invalid representation? Dialogue on identity is generally limited to the educated elite. To what degree are democratic principles applicable to the formation of a common identity? These questions are not only pertinent to the Sikhs, but to other communities who are undergoing the convulsions of self-representation such as Native peoples, the French in Canada, former African and Asian colonies, Muslim countries and the newly independent states of Eastern Europe. Oberoi's *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, while not answering these questions, is informative and germane.

❖ *The world's writing systems*. Edited by Peter T. Daniels and William Bright. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xlv + 920 pp. 222 \$ CAN.

By Kevin Tuite,

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Long confined to the margins of linguistics and anthropology, the study of writing has drawn the attention of a considerable number of scholars in the past three decades. After over twenty years of solitude, I. J. Gelb's ground-breaking 1952 monograph now has plenty of company on the library shelves: dozens of books offer theories on the origins of writing, its history and "evolution" (with the alphabet, of course, as its glorious endpoint), and its impact on cognition, culture and society. The book under review [henceforth

WWS], is, however, primarily a reference work, intended to complement, rather than supplant, most of its thinner shelf-mates. Let me say at the outset that I recommend WWS very highly, and consider it a must-have for any secondary-school and university library. It is to be hoped that a more affordable paperback version will bring this valuable resource within the reach of individual buyers.

## 1. STRUCTURE

The two editors, Peter T. Daniels [PTD] and William Bright [WB], assisted by over six dozen contributors, present all of the principal and most of the minor scripts known to humankind. The individual articles, over a hundred of them, are grouped into thirteen Parts (I. Grammatology. II. Ancient Near Eastern Writing Systems. III. Decipherment. IV. East Asian Writing Systems. V. European Writing Systems. VI. South Asian Writing Systems. VII. Southeast Asian Writing Systems. VIII. Middle Eastern Writing Systems. IX. Scripts Invented in Modern Times X. Use and Adaptation of Scripts. XI. Sociolinguistics and Scripts. XII. Secondary Notation Systems. XIII. Imprinting and Printing). PTD, a specialist on the history and typology of Near Eastern writing systems, contributed Parts I and XIII in their entirety, as well as the introductions to most of the intervening parts and a useful sketch on the methodology of decipherment. In terms of page length WB's contribution is far less extensive, consisting of two entries on South Asian scripts and the introduction to Part XI. Simple division shows that the mean length of each contribution is slightly over nine pages, but the space is efficiently utilized. The typical entry comprises a brief account of the history and origins of the script, the uses to which it was put, and the nature of the writing system. Character lists are given for nearly all of the alphabets and syllabaries, and tables of selected signs, sometimes running to several dozens, for those writing systems employing logograms, characters which denote the meaning, rather than the pronunciation, of a word. Each entry is followed by a bibliography, usually fairly extensive and up-to-date. One especially attractive feature of WWS is the inclusion of sample texts, accompanied by not one, but at least four, parallel representations: the text in its original script, a transliteration of the latter, a phonetic transcription (often surprisingly different from the transliteration), a morphemic gloss, and a free translation into English. (The hundred or so type faces used in the book, incidentally, are of uniformly high quality, with regards to both legibility and aesthetics. Much of the credit, as the editors point out,