

RUPA KANABAR  
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MMU2005 -World music Liliija Zobens

**“With specific reference to your fieldwork project, discuss the ways in which people express and negotiate aspects of cultural identity through music.”**

According to Kay Kaufman Shelemay the aspects of cultural identity in terms of music,

“Music embodies diverse identities, including nationality, region, ethnicity, race, class, religion, and gender.” (1)

Music is a very powerful medium and in some societies there have been some attempts to control its use. It is powerful at the level of the social group because it functions to facilitate communication, which goes beyond words, enables meanings to be shared and promotes the development and maintenance of individual, group, cultural and national identities. Our fieldwork project was essentially a sociological enquiry into the role of music in people’s lives, and in particular the importance of music as a means of establishing and maintaining cultural identity. Our fieldwork was based on a renowned musician named, Kuljit Bhamra and the aim of our fieldwork was therefore to investigate how through his music he maintained, expressed and negotiated aspects of his cultural identity of being Sikh.

Sikhism began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. (2) The first great spiritual teacher of the Sikhs was Guru Nanak. His teachings were written down in the holy book of the Sikhs, The Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs live mainly in the Punjab area of North India. Music is very important in Sikh worship as a way of expressing and negotiating their Sikh’s identity. It is played at all kinds of religious ceremonies and functions to connect all the Sikhs spiritually through the name of God. In India, music in everyday life has no religious barriers and therefore the religious aspect of a Sikh’s cultural identity is constantly being expressed and negotiated between people of the same culture. However, due to the political situation of India at the time, when the British Colony began taking over, it was difficult for Sikhs to express the religious aspect of their cultural identity.

Sangeeta Bhamra, the mother of Kuljit Bhamra, was an established singer in India. She expressed and maintained the religious aspect of her identity at the time by singing sacred music in the Sikh temple, such as ‘Kirtan and ‘shabads’, which are known to be religious and devotional types of music in Sikhism. In other words, she negotiated and expressed the religious aspect of her identity by singing praises of God with the people who also shared the same identity as her. However, the political situation the time in India, as stated previously, posed a threat to her expressing the religious aspect of her identity and therefore like most Sikhs, she immigrated to

Kenya so that she could continue to express and negotiate the religious aspect of her cultural identity with liberation from the British colony. Kuljit Bhamra's musical preference can therefore be marked by parental influence. Due to not living in the native country of the Sikhs, Sangeeta was determined for her son Kuljit Bhamra to maintain his cultural identity. From a very early age, he was taught in the Sikh temple to play the traditional North Indian instrument, the tabla, (3) as a way he could maintain and express his cultural identity. He continually maintained and expressed his cultural identity, by continually accompanying his mother to the temple. Whilst she sang the sacred hymns he too expressed the religious aspect of his cultural identity by playing the traditional North Indian instrument, the tabla. Therefore as Kuljit Bhamra quoted in the interview, "playing the tabla was symbolic of my heritage." (4) His musical preference therefore was culturally determined by his mother. Therefore, from a young age, Kuljit Bhamra was influenced by "socialisation or enculturation", (5) which is "the instilling of certain cultural qualities in the young." (6) Furthermore, Kuljit Bhamra illustrates the theory of the sociocultural matrix in his upbringing,

"the major point that for musical performances to take place, people everywhere must undergo a process of learning the acceptable forms of musical activity in their society. Music therefore plays an important part in human's lives when constructing rituals of initiation to teach music to the initiates." (6)

Kay Kaufman Shelemay, also further supports this view and states,

"Musical traditions are transmitted through biological families and communicated and linked by descent." (7)

Kuljit Bhamra therefore played the tabla in his words,

"I played the tabla as a way of maintaining close cultural ties with my native country and also played them to express and maintain the religious aspect of my cultural identity. The tabla that I play take me back to my roots as tabla is often mostly associated with Indian classical music, it symbolically traced me back to the existence of my ancestors that were in my native country." (8)

When Kuljit came into Great Britain, he maintained his cultural identity by continuing to sing and do tabla performances in the temples. According to him, "living in a western society that incorporates different religions and values, Sikhs found it important to go to the temple in order to maintain and negotiate the religious aspect of their cultural identity by meeting people of the same background." (9) Bhamra's views are further supported by the view of Martin Stokes in his book 'Ethnicity, Identity and Music:'

"Music allows establishment and maintenance of cultural identity and allows to create cultural identity as it allows people to recover identities and places of the boundaries which separate them." (10)

Kuljit Bhamra negotiated the religious aspect of his cultural identity further in the fact that he chose to live in Southall, which was an area mainly dominated by a

Sikh community. Therefore, by living in the heart of the Sikh community he was able to negotiate the religious aspect by going to social gatherings at the Sikh temple and this maintained solidarity between him and his Sikh peers. Music therefore in Shelemay's words,

“Retains the tradition of a particular place, despite the movement of people and their music well beyond these geographical boundaries.” (11)

Kuljit Bhamra also believes that music plays a crucial part in Sikh worship. In his words,

“The Guru Granth Sahib” consists of different rags, meaning scale that are in the form of shabads, which link to key events in a Sikh's life that maintain a Sikh's identity...the paths are illustrated by different rags...For example, the death of someone would be sung or played with a rag of despair. And so on.” (12)

This is further supported by theorists in the book ‘Sounds and Society’, they state,

“music plays a vital part in religious ceremonies and in everyday life of rural communities. There are songs for birth, death, marriage and for aspects of a person's journey through life.” (13)

In India, religious worship is central to the Sikh community. For example, in Kuljit Bhamra's words, “religious values shape lifestyle and influence decisions that mark a Sikh's cultural identity.”(14) Kuljit Bhamra was influenced by these religious values in terms of his daily routine, which is to wake up, wash and go to the temple. His day would therefore commence with the singing of the shabads. Therefore, he maintained and negotiated the religious aspect of his cultural identity by continuing to perform the traditional Sikh practices in his daily life in a western society. Kuljit Bhamra's actions support Bourdieu view that, “cultural identities are maintained by integrating past experiences.”(15) Kay Kaufman elaborates on this view and states, “in some cases, the musical styles that symbolise identity maintain strong links with the past or with an original homeland.” (16) Kuljit Bhamra therefore used music as device whereby he could separate himself from the western culture and maintain and negotiate his cultural identity. This further supports the view of other theorists in the book ‘Music in Human Life’, where they state:

“Consumption of music is the interplay between major structural forces, the formation and reproduction of specific cultural realities in relation to those forces and the way those forces and identities are negotiated as a consequence of individual biographical process.”(17)

However, as Kuljit Bhamra became increasingly more comfortable and familiar with the western surroundings he began gaining an interest for and internalising some of the western music styles that he was constantly surrounded by. Due to this, he decided to expand his music library. Bhamra stated:

“As I grew older, naturally I began developing an interest for western music and therefore I did not restrict myself to the eastern music that I was culturally absorbed or shall I say socialised into. Gaining an interest in both styles enabled me to maintain my innate cultural identity as well as my new one... my British Asian identity.” (18)

Bhamra’s view supports the view of the theorist Pena in the book ‘Ethnicity, Identity and Music’ who states,

“Identification with the urban genre, provides the means by which rural-urban immigrants can transform themselves.” (19)

It was through this “transformation” (20) that he introduced the style of Bhangra to the United Kingdom.

Firstly, the origins of bhangra are in the Punjab, in North India. (21) Bhangra in the Punjab is a type of folk dance, sung and played at harvest time. (22) Kuljit Bhamra negotiated his Sikh identity with his British identity by mixing the basic rhythm and the feel of traditional bhangra with the high-tech sounds of Western pop music. Bhamra stated that,

“I chose to maintain and express the historical roots of my identity by playing traditional instruments of bhangra such as the tabla and dhol. I also sang in my native language. I combined these eastern beats to western pop beats by playing the western instruments such as the drums. The blend of the eastern and the western music, enabled me to negotiate both the east and west aspects of identity and therefore enabled me to express my identity as a British Asian.” (23)

Bhamra’s view illustrates that of Kay Kaufman’s as he states, “Cultural exchange results from culinary and linguistic blending.” (24) Bhamra’s blend of eastern and western styles have marked a significance in Great Britain in terms of making people more aware of this hybridist identity. His first fusion debut single called “Railgadee” (25) was a major success in England as both the Sikh community and the western community could identify with it. So, it was through music that he could express how he could identify with different cultural groups. Evidence of his success was marked by the review of The Times, which stated, “Kuljit Bhamra introduced Bhangra to a non Asian public,” (26) and The Daily Telegraph, which stated, “Kuljit Bhamra’s immediate success is due to the fact that he has been able to blend both eastern and western music without sacrificing the roots of either.” (27)

It was Kuljit Bhamra therefore that through his music, he initiated a process of culture socialisation and secularisation between both of the identities. Bhamra further stated that,

“ I used my music as a way of allowing British Born Asians to identify and express their identity by listening and dancing to my music, which was also symbolised the eastern and western elements of their identities.” (28)

His view was further strengthened by the view of Martin Stokes as he stated that,

“acts of listening, dancing, arguing, thinking and writing about music, provide the means through which people can construct and mobilise identities.” (29)

However, Kuljit Bhamra stated that,

“Although I did express and negotiate my British- Sikh identity through my music, I still wanted to maintain more, the traditions of my origins...therefore, in my music, I never allowed for the western beats to dominate over the eastern style. The language and beats of my native country functioned as being the more dominant styles of my music and this was a way of both expressing and maintaining by historical roots. The tabla for example is symbol of who I am as the sound reminds me of my native soil and the memories of playing music together as a community. I also used my music as a tool for educating other British Asians of the next generation about their heritage as initially having the innate identity of a Sikh.”(30)

Therefore, the use of his native language Punjabi being incorporated within his music would function to educate those British Sikhs about their mother tongue as they are prevented of speaking it in the western society that they live in. By listening, singing and dancing to his music they too would be able to retain and maintain aspects of their historical roots. This is further supported by the view of Kay Kaufman Shelemay as he states:

“Music at the centre of efforts, to revive the language of a culture by a generation that has lost the ability to speak the language. The sound itself contains distinctive marker of identity, providing entry into a soundscape rich in meaning.” (31)

The Bahara Punjab migrated from India and are an example of a group that express their Sikh cultural identity through performing movements of the traditional bhangra dance.(32) For example, they display bhangra dance techniques that reproduce the farming processes and harvesting processes of digging for instance that are symbolic of their native homeland Punjab. (33) They also wear traditional and colourful clothing, which also acts a marker for expressing their cultural identity. For instance, the bright colourful traditional clothing illustrates and reminds of the blossoming of the harvest season in their native homeland. Kuljit Bhamra states that, “it is through their traditional music and traditional dance that migrant Sikhs express and maintain their group identity as it reminds them of their native homeland.” (34) His view is further supported by Stokes who states that, “music and dance make people feel that they are in touch with an essential part of themselves, their emotions and their community.”(35) Therefore, it is through the performance of the traditional dance and the traditional music that migrant Sikhs are able to negotiate their group identity, through the collective demonstration and sharing of their values and beliefs of their culture between one another.

Furthermore, when British Asians attend night clubs, the Bahara Punjab group perform these traditional aspects of dance and music of their Sikh identity in order for the young British Asians of the second generation to aspire to it and symbolically connect them and create a bond between them and their homeland. Bhamra states that,

“when I go and perform a bhangra gig with a bhangra band at a club, I see that all of the second generation British Asians copy the movements of the bhangra dancers on stage and sing along to the words of the song being played in their mother tongue...they are inspired by the migrant first generation of bhangra performers that are on stage and therefore decide to negotiate their British Asian identity with that of the original Sikh identity by copying the dance movements and singing the songs in their native language...thus the bond between them and their native homeland is created. They too wear bright colourful traditional clothing like the bhangra performers on the stage, which also marks their way of expressing and negotiating their cultural identity.” (36)

Therefore, the bhangra dancers “re-live”(37) and celebrate their Sikh identity by expressing it, whilst the British Asians negotiate it in order to create a bond with it and express it. Kay Kaufman further supports this by stating,

“A sense of identity can be put into play through music, by performing it, dancing to it, listening to it or even thinking about it.” (38)

According to Kuljit Bhamra , many Sikh migrants of the first generation negotiate their identity with their British born Asian children by in his words, “exerting a parental influence over them and culturally trying to determine them to create and maintain close aspects with their historical roots. (39)From a young age, Sikh parents take their children to the temple in order for them to internalise norms, values and beliefs of their religion. They also send and encourage their children to learn these traditional aspects of the Sikh culture, such as learning to sing shabads, to perform bhangra dancing and learn to read and write in their mother tongue so that they are able to express their cultural identity continuously throughout their life even though they are living in a western society.

The relationship between Kuljit Bhamra and the music he performs and composes on a personal level, in his words is that, “music is significant to me in terms of self expression.”(40) He further elaborates on this and states,

“I find that language is limiting, music acts as a language itself to all...music appeals to emotions and the response to it by others is not verbal, but physical, psychological and spiritual. That is why, I find language limiting.” (41)

He offered an example to demonstrate and explain what he means,

“If I’m speaking to a Chinese person in my native language Punjabi, they will not understand me. But if I express myself through my music-the style of the tempo, the instruments, its whole composition will convey particular emotions that the Chinese person will respond to. Music therefore is important to me as way of connecting to humans and therefore is a universal language.” (42)

The view of Suzanne Langer supports this view further, she states, “Music represents the life of feeling in a way that language cannot.” (43) Derywick Cooke, the author of

The Language of Music, strengthens this argument further by stating, “Notes, like words have emotional connotations in terms of expressing self expression.” (44) Therefore, Kuljit Bhamra uses elements in his music to produce an overall pattern, which is perceived as meaningful. He “self-expresses”(45) his cultural identity through his music, the style of his music symbolises his cultural identity to other cultural groups. They recognise his identity through the style of music that he chooses to express. For example, other cultural groups immediately recognise Bhamra’s identity as a Sikh through the norms and values he expresses of the Sikh identity. The tabla for instance, is widely known to be an instrument that originates from North India. Therefore, when Bhamra plays the tabla it acts in terms of a “universal language” that Kuljit’s origins are from North India and that he inherits the Sikh identity.

In conclusion, Kuljit Bhamra’s character represents the view of Peter J. Martin, he states,

“ The music which we thus internalise comes to sound right and natural, even though we may subsequently realise that the conventions which organise it are arbitrary, in the sense that they are not shared by other cultures, and represent only a fraction of the possible ways in which melody, harmony and rhythm may be combined,, we find it difficult to appreciate the music of other cultures as we can of our own.” (46)

Therefore, we found that to Kuljit Bhamra, music plays a significant part in maintaining, expressing and negotiating aspects of his cultural identity, such as, religion, gender, language and dance. Music expression was also important to him because it enabled him to change and negotiate his identity to create a new identity of being present in a western culture-his British Asian identity. However, it was through the continuous expression of his traditional style of music that he chose to celebrate and maintain his historical roots. Music, therefore ideally for him was a device of self-expression and a universal language.

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