

SECTION FOUR

# Communities



# Making Pilgrimage, Making Home

## *Sikh Sacred Soundings in Kenya*

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The Kalasinghas (as Sikhs from India are addressed in Swahili) have a multigenerational history in East Africa, but little scholarship has been done on them. As a people, Sikhs are known to be particularly mobile, and the Afro-Asiatic seascape has been a significant part of their worldwide migration, dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. A minority faith community from the Punjab region of India, Sikhs form less than 2 percent of the Indian population but make up a good 10 percent of diasporic Indians. Sikhs who settled in Kenya, as well as those among them who subsequently migrated to Western countries, have a deep sense of belonging to Kenya. Most consider Kenya, rather than India, more directly and affectively as home and do not harbor a desire to “return” to India. They distinguish themselves from Indians in their ways of life, identifying instead as Kenyans.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the role of sacred sound in enabling this sense of belonging, in particular through its centrality in the development of a new pilgrimage site in Makindu, Kenya. In contrast to the earlier literature on pilgrimage that focuses on it as a process of liminality, I argue that the development of this new pilgrimage is a “homing” enterprise—a way of deepening the sense of home, in a new country, in a mobile world. Based on ethnographic research, with online fieldwork,<sup>1</sup> I show that it was sacred musicking that planted the seeds of this pilgrimage site and energized its development, and it is sacred sound that continues to infuse it with sustained vibrancy.

The role of sacred song in the lives of Sikhs in and from East Africa has not been directly studied. In an investigation of the community networks through which Indian merchants gained a sense of belonging in twentieth-century Kenya, Misha Mintz-Roth (2019) mentions prayer halls, though without elaborating. In a

study of the political, economic, and social impact of Sikhs in Kenya, Job Mulati Chebai (2001) recognizes the role of Sikh places of worship and sacred recitations in forging a sense of community among Sikhs. In her pioneering study exploring the social lives of the (twice immigrant) Kenyan Sikh community in the United Kingdom, Parminder Bhachu (1985) finds it to be committed to preserving its “East Africanness” through networks and marriage alliances.

My ethnographic findings too show the significant role of networks and religious practices, along with the centrality of musical worship. Focusing on sacred soundings, song and chant in particular, I show how sound has been and continues to be essential to processes of homemaking. Indeed, from my observations when visiting Sikh places of worship in various countries, the key role of sacred sound as affective connective tissue could be made for all diasporic locations.<sup>2</sup> What is unique about this story is the development of a pilgrimage site in a diasporic location with no Sikhs resident in the immediate vicinity, and the ways it includes the indigenous local population.

#### RHIZOMATIC BELONGING WITH SACRED SONG AS CONNECTIVE TISSUE

Drawing on my interlocutors’ worldviews, I conceptualize multiple belonging in a world constantly on the move with the notion of the rhizome as put forth by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 21).

It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overfills. It constitutes linear multiplicities . . . which can be laid out on a plane of consistency.

The center (middle) for Sikhs, I propose, is their primary scripture Guru Granth Sahib. Sikh identity stems from it and grows with diverse nuances in different locations. The connection is provided by scriptural song. My elder interlocutor, the late Seva Singh Mandla, who was born in Kenya and moved to the United Kingdom in his middle years, told me:

First, I was a British citizen [British East Africa], then Kenyan citizen [in the independent nation-state], now British citizen [in the United Kingdom]. I am proud to be Kenyan, British, and Sikh.

When I asked him which nation Sikhs felt closer to, his reply was squarely:

Sikhs felt as Sikhs. Sikhs have their own identity. Sikhs were able to practice their own religion. Guru Granth Sahib [scripture] is the focus of our attention. Our Guru Granth Sahib speaks. Gurbāni (scriptural verse) gives us directions for every occasion.

Key to engendering rhizomatic belongings in Sikhs globally, is the central role of a scripture that is a hymnal (of about 6,000 songs) along with the nonhierarchical

institutional structure of Sikhī (Sikhism in English; lit. teachings). Sikh worship consists primarily of singing and chanting scriptural verses, *sabad*, and is part of Sikh everyday life, from the personal and family level, to the public with congregational worship at the gurdwāra (public place of worship). At all these levels, practice is independent of a higher overseeing institution.<sup>3</sup> There is not a hierarchical system of clergy organized by a central authority, though there are professional *granthī* (learned in the scriptures) and *rāgi* (cantors), and any Sikh can perform any of the liturgical and ritual functions of worship. Sikhs (lit. students) understand themselves as disciples of their scriptural Guru (spiritual preceptor), the Guru Granth Sahib, and hold a deeply affective relationship to it. Wherever Sikhs have settled, the Guru Granth Sahib has accompanied them, forming the center around which Sikh networks developed, engendered by everyday sacred musicking of scriptural songs. With a perfectly mobile Guru, the disciple becomes highly mobile too.

My interlocutors from Kenya across the board spoke of the significant presence of sacred sound in their lives there, at home and in gurdwāray (pl. of gurdwāra), and how listening to sacred song and chant, eating a ritual communal meal, and participating in various service activities was a fulfilling aspect of their social, emotional, and spiritual lives. Rani, who now lives in the United States, particularly remembers the occasions of *akhand pāth* (continuous complete recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib over forty-eight hours), which typically culminates in *sabad kīrtan* (singing of scriptural verses).

*Akhand pāth kinne pyār nāl rakhde si* [We did *akhand pāth* with so much love]. We were hardly ten, and we were taken to the *gurdwāra*; we did *sevā* [service]. Getting there the night before, washing the *gurdwāra* floor, drying it. Women would get there ahead of time, make the menu . . . freshly made food . . . serve the *langar* [ritual communal meal]. Also, *akhand pāth* at home. My duty was to make *badāmāñ da dudh* (milk with almonds) at 10, to serve the *pāthī* (chanter) at night.

Savinder Kaur Bhogal, who moved to the United Kingdom when she got married, reminisces about her parental home:

We had Guru Granth Sahib Ji at home and it was a norm for the whole family including the children to get up around 2 am to recite Gurbani and do Asa Di Var [Song of Hope], which was followed by Parshad [sweet wheat flour pudding] that we children enjoyed.

The practice of everyday immersion in a sacred soundscape hails back to Punjab. In village life, it was customary to start the day with an aural experience of sacred verses. Village folk on their way to work would on a daily basis make a stop at the gurdwāra to take a sip from the aural pool of sacred sound. With the advent of the public announcement system, it was common for villages to broadcast sacred chants during the wee hours of dawn. Anthropologist Murray

Leaf writes in his book, *Song of Hope: The Green Revolution in a Punjab Village*, how he was woken up in the early morning hours in a village he names Shahidpur, by the PA system broadcasting the Asa Ki Var [Song of Hope]. When he asked his local friend, it was explained to him that this was not an unusual feature of that morning, or that village, but rather, as Leaf puts it, “before the first light of every dawn, the entire Punjab was, one might say, ablaze with song” (1984, 16).

Rhizomatic belongings are supported by the sacred song-texts themselves, as in the following examples (with links to recordings on YouTube). In fact, a framed translation of the first line of the first quote below hangs on a wall at Gurdwara Makindu.

ਜਿਥੈ ਜਾਇ ਬਹੈ ਮੇਰਾ ਸਤਿਗੁਰੂ ਸੇ ਬਾਨੁ ਸੁਹਾਵਾ ਰਾਮ ਰਾਜੇ ॥  
ਗੁਰਸਿਖੀ ਸੇ ਬਾਨੁ ਭਾਲਿਆ ਲੈ ਧੁਰਿ ਮੁਖਿ ਲਾਵਾ ॥ (Guru Granth Sahib [1604] 1704, 450)<sup>4</sup>  
Where my True Guru dwells, that place is pleasing.  
It is that place that the Guru's Sikh seeks and embraces.<sup>5</sup>  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x4xTKZ00BA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x4xTKZ00BA); accessed May 1, 2022.

ਧੰਨੁ ਸੁ ਦੇਸੁ ਜਗਾ ਤੂੰ ਵਸਿਆ ਮੇਰੇ ਸਜਣ ਮੀਤ ਮੁਰਾਰੇ ਜੀਉ ॥ (Guru Granth Sahib, 96)  
That land is blessed, where You dwell, my Beloved Friend.  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-tWuhCf8xc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-tWuhCf8xc); accessed May 1, 2022.

ਮਨੁ ਪਰਦੇਸੀ ਜੇ ਥੀਐ ਸਭੁ ਦੇਸੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ ॥ (Guru Granth Sahib, 767)  
If the heart-mind-soul becomes a stranger, all lands becomes alien.  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE1oQJLSBdU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE1oQJLSBdU); accessed May 1, 2022.

The last quote points to an understanding of belonging in an experiential sense. In this sense, the homeland can become a place of estrangement and a new land can provide the sense of feeling at home. Such a focus on the experiential has been used in phenomenological approaches to understanding the nature of home. These studies have elaborated on being at home as a lived experience of locality (Brah 1996) and related to the presence or absence of an emotion or affect (Gurney 1997; Ahmed 1999). Ways of being at home have been discussed as grounded in activities (Jackson 1995), in social relations (Somerville 1997), and expressions of social meanings and identities (Wardhaugh 1999). Importantly for my analysis, it has been argued that rather than passivity, there is active and intentional production of home (Mallet 2004). Indeed, as a *sabad* instructs:

ਆਪਣ ਹਥੀ ਆਪਣਾ ਆਪੇ ਹੀ ਕਾਜੁ ਸਵਾਰੀਐ ॥ (Guru Granth Sahib, 474)  
Yourself improve your daily affairs.

In the context of diasporic belongings in particular, mobility and travel become aspects of dwelling (Clifford 1997), and it is in this sense that I explore here the meaningfulness of pilgrimage to Gurdwara Makindu for Sikh devotees in and from Kenya.

## PILGRIMAGE AS A WAY OF MAKING HOME

Recent scholarship on pilgrimage has broadened the conversation from the Turnerian framework of liminality to posit pilgrimage as a form of cultural mobility in a world constantly on the move. In *Reframing Pilgrimage* (2004), Simon Coleman and John Eade shift the analysis from exceptionality to one of the everyday social and political. As part of mundane cultural mobility, pilgrimage is seen less as starkly extraordinary and separated from society and more as part of the constitution of meaning through everyday social, cultural, and political processes. Drawing on John Urry's explication of the significance of physical travel in social life in terms of the benefits of "intermittent corporeal co-presence" (2002, 57), Coleman and Eade point to pilgrimage as having the same potential. I combine this with Urry's discussion of intermittent physical proximity as sustaining family life for people with many locations of home, to argue for the making of a new pilgrimage within a diasporic location as a way of constituting home there.

For my interlocutors pilgrimage is about the embodied and embedded experience of reliving certain feelings related to being at home. Shared worship-related activities within a framework that emphasizes temporal longevity of the community in that location engender feelings of comfort and contentment.

The last time I visited Makindu it was in 2004 after having climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and ended in Makindu where the family had arranged Sri Akhand Paath [nonstop recitation of the entire Guru Granth Sahib, taking two days].<sup>6</sup> I was there for three days in absolute heaven. I don't have any more words to describe the tranquility and the serenity of the place attached to the emotions that we felt.

—Surjit Singh Bhalla

It is a historical site, this for me is like a pilgrimage of going to Hazoor Sahib [historical gurdwāra], India, and I always look forward to go to Makindu to pay my respects and enjoy langar prepared by the locals.

—Onkar Singh Bhogal

I want to be part of the atmosphere . . . *sangat naal* [with the congregation].

—Avtar Singh Thethy

A key dimension of this corporeal co-presence is sound. As a primarily vibratory entity that transmits materially (Friedner and Helmreich 2012), sound connects bodies through corporeal transmission of affect (Brennan 2004; Kapchan 2015; Kaur 2016). In the context of devout worship in particular, sacred musical sound has the potential to enhance the sense of corporeal proximity and engender a congregation of "sonic bodies" (Henriques 2011), bodies that know through the sensation of sound. Such an "aggregation of the affected" (Born 2013) is crucial to the atmosphere my interlocutors seek and enjoy in pilgrimage. Given the centrality of congregational musical worship in Sikh culture, sonically constituted corporeal

co-presence is part of the feeling of home. In explicating this fundamentally constitutive role of musical sound in pilgrimage, I add to scholarly explorations thus far of pilgrim songs as musical performance of the sacred journey (Bohlman 1996) and of the noisy soundscape of pilgrimage eliciting tolerant listening from pilgrims (Wood 2014).

#### THE MAKING OF A NEW PILGRIMAGE SITE WITHIN A DIASPORIC LOCATION

##### *Routes and Roots*

Historic Sikh sacred sites date back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, to the founding and early development of the faith. Most of these are now (after the partition of Punjab in 1947) in Pakistan, a nation estranged from India (where most Sikhs live). Pilgrimage to these sites is state controlled with heavy restrictions on the number of pilgrims and their itinerary within Pakistan. For Sikhs this pilgrimage retraces the roots and routes of the founders of the faith. For the thousands of Sikhs whose families had to migrate at the time of the partition from the newly carved Islamic state of Pakistan to an ostensibly secular Hindustan (India),<sup>7</sup> it is also a deeply emotional visit to the land of their ancestors. For Sikhs in and from East Africa, Gurdwara Makindu has developed as a sacred site that traces the arrival of their ancestors to this land about a hundred years ago. In this case, roots have resulted from routes.

Sikhs were initially brought from British India to the British East Africa Protectorate at the end of the nineteenth century, along with other Punjabis and Indians, as indentured labor to work on the Kenya-Uganda rail line from the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa to Kampala. The journey was long and arduous, in wooden dhows and rough seas. However, Sikhs from Punjab continued to venture out independently to East Africa over the first half of the twentieth century for better socioeconomic prospects. When colonial East Africa obtained independence in the mid-twentieth century, many Sikh families, concerned with their lot within emergent African nationalism in the newly formed nation-states of Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, migrated to the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. However, many stayed put.<sup>8</sup>

My family originates from Punjab, and in 1935, my father came to Kenya. He was a schoolteacher teaching Urdu, the salary was very low. Therefore, my grandad trained him to be a carpenter. He used to make wagon wheels for the British army. At some point to better his life he decided to travel to Kenya and work as a carpenter. He traveled to Kenya on a dhow. My father worked there as a carpenter for a Sikh family and was paid very little salary. With the help of his friends, he started his own factory manufacturing furniture. In a short time, he became a successful businessman. He never wanted to leave Kenya and passed away in Kenya in 1987.

—Onkar Singh Bhogal

Another interlocutor, Rani, who was born in Kisumu, East Africa (now Kenya) in the 1950s tells me that her grandfather had migrated from his village in Punjab, India, in search of better job prospects, and a life unhampered by caste.

My grandpa was well educated, but was not getting a job in his village because of his caste. He was downgraded. I'm not going to take it, he said. He was adventurous. When he went back to visit, they said, Oh, you live in Africa? Do you live in trees? He was not happy to go back there; *koi lor nai utthe jān di, koi respect nahi karda* [There is no need to go there, no one respects].

Seventy-year-old Pritam Kaur, who has raised a family in Nairobi, Kenya, and now is a widow living alone, was quite clear: "*koi sanu kahe india chale jao*, [if someone says to us, go to India] no no! We like it here."

### *Sacred Soundings as Seed and Sustenance*

As is the case for most early locations of Sikh gurdwāray in East Africa, Gurdwara Makindu is on the rail line. Makindu station was one of the depots used for refueling and water supplies. A number of Sikhs were stationed there. The story goes that, along with their non-Sikh friends, they began to congregate under a tree to sing songs of divine praise. Soon, on that very spot they made a small shed for worship.

In 1926, a gurdwāra was constructed on a concrete slab with corrugated tin. The Sikhs stationed at the rail depot met at Gurdwara Makindu regularly to sing and chant scriptural verses. All night singing sessions were a particular favorite. Devotees carried from India a special copy of the Guru Granth Sahib, which was hand printed and, at 2,450 pages, much larger and heavier than the mechanically printed version of 1,430 pages.<sup>9</sup> These devotees, traveling in wooden dhows on treacherous seas, are known to have carried the heavy scripture, not packed in luggage, but ceremoniously on the top of their heads with an attendant fanning a ceremonial whisk. The presence of the special copy of the scripture attracted many Sikh visitors—those passing by made a stop at Makindu station to visit the gurdwāra. The Makindu station and gurdwāra flourished for some two decades.

With the advent of the diesel engine, however, the Makindu station was no longer needed as a depot, and employees were moved to other locations. The gurdwāra was locked and left in the care of an African Kenyan by the name of Gwalo. Every now and then, a Sikh passing by would stop and go to the gurdwāra to pay respect to the scripture and conduct its ceremonial opening, reading, and closing.

The story of the subsequent rejuvenation of Gurdwara Makindu indicates how critical sound has been to the making of this pilgrimage site. My interlocutor, the late Sewa Singh Mandla, told me that a contingent of Sikh musicians was instructed by their spiritual guide, Sant Baba Puran Singh of Kericho, to conduct monthly

kīrtan sessions at Gurdwara Makindu on full moon weekends (*pūranmāshi*). Sewa Singh was part of this contingent. In his words:

We would go there on a Friday. We cleaned up, properly, nicely; spread white sheets. We would start kīrtan, go all night, do Asa ki Vār in the morning. Vadde babji [spiritual guide] told us: You have to do this every pūranmāshi. So once a month we did kīrtan there. Gradually, it became popular.

Thus, it was sacred sound that sowed the seed of Gurdwara Makindu as a sacred site and that revived it as an active place of worship and pilgrimage. The singing and chanting of scriptural verses continue to be an integral part of the spiritual experience for Sikh pilgrims visiting this site.<sup>10</sup> Akhand pāth is especially popular here, with families commissioning them to mark special occasions and seek blessings. The continuous chanting of the entire Guru Granth Sahib over forty-eight hours, with different chanters taking turns, configures an especially soothing, inspiring, and meaningful space for a weekend stay.

With the growing popularity of Gurdwara Makindu as a pilgrimage site, a much larger gurdwāra building and complex was constructed. During the construction, the extra-large copy of the scripture was moved to Kericho. On completion of the project in 2010, the scripture was returned to Gurdwara Makindu with great fanfare, and sacred song and chant was the key accompanying activity. The journey was taken in a chartered train, thus tracing the roots back to the first Sikhs who came to build the great train line, the lunatic line, dubbed so due to the wild terrain it traversed with the man-eating lions of Tsavo that devoured a number of workers.

The current gurdwāra complex houses, in addition to the worship halls where sacred song and chant are performed with the scripture as the presiding Guru, a dining hall and community kitchen that serves langar throughout the day to all visitors, ranging daily from a few hundred to a few thousand. There is free hotel-quality accommodation as well, in well-appointed and serviced rooms, and visitors can stay up to two nights at a time. The compound is well groomed with a playground for children, and roaming peacocks add a sense of enchantment.<sup>11</sup> According to the manager, at one time there was a peacock who was especially attuned to the sacred sounds and danced every time kīrtan was being sung in the worship hall.

### *History and Myth*

Along with congregational musical worship and communal dining, the accumulation of myth and history has played its role too in carving out Gurdwara Makindu as a special place. Many relate to the tenth and last Sikh human Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), who is remembered especially for his fight against social injustice, in particular religious oppression. The story goes that the African caretaker Gwalo had a vivid dream one night of a Kalasingha on a white horse telling him that the gurdwāra should be revived as an active place of worship. In the morning, he recognized the person to be Guru Gobind Singh, whose portrait was painted

on the gurdwāra wall. After this, several pilgrims reported hearing horse galloping sounds (sound here too!). In some recounting, it was the Muslim cleric at the nearby mosque who reported that on several occasions he had seen a white horse with a Sikh descending from the sky into the gurdwāra. Another devotee described that one night when she was reciting from the scripture a shadow fell on it that she recognized as Guru Gobind Singh standing behind as an attendant swaying the ceremonial whisk. In one story, a fire broke out at the gurdwāra, burning most of the things, but the scripture remained unharmed. Many say that their prayers made at the gurdwāra were all answered. Call it history or myth, these accounts have combined to position Gurdwara Makindu as a special sacred site.

My interlocutor, Avtar Singh Thethy, tells me of his own special experience in 1998. After what he described as a very serene time at the gurdwāra, where he was also able to read from the special copy of the scripture, he got a ride to Kericho:

But after 15 minutes, 10 miles, we had to return because he [his ride] had forgotten to return the room key. When we got back, Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh [spiritual guide] said, *tūsi ā gayé, bahut changā kitā, bīr lé jāni hai* [you came back, very good, the scripture has to be taken]. This was due to the construction activity. When we were going with the *bīr* [scripture], a big cobra came up to the road and spread its hood. We were going at very high speed, could not break. But the car just went over smoothly as if there was nothing there. *Ai kī hōya!* [What just happened!] . . . When you have faith, things happen.

#### AFFECTIVE ENTANGLEMENTS: CARVING OUT A “DIASPORA SPACE” THAT IS HOME

In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah introduces the concept of diaspora space to recognize the embedded nature of the diasporic experience. “Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes” (1985, 178). This space is inhabited not just by migrants and their descendants but also by the indigenous. “The concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (Brah 1985, 178). For South Asians living in Kenya, life is not without social and political tensions with the indigenous population. British East Africa was a land of opportunity for South Asians where their artisan and business skills enabled rapid and substantial socioeconomic progress. However, colonial policy played a role too. In particular, the stratified racial policy of the “colonial sandwich” placed Europeans at the top, Asians in the middle, and Africans at the bottom, relegating the indigenous people to low-paid service jobs and inferior social status. Back in India, British divisive politics and late colonial Hindu nationalist movements had contributed to unsettled feelings among Sikhs. Caste division was another factor of social dissatisfaction that was mitigated by the move to the middle status in

East Africa. The rapidly growing socioeconomic power of the Asian community understandably generated deep resentments among the indigenous population that peaked during the nationalist movements of independence.<sup>12</sup> While Kenya did not expel South Asians, as did Uganda, many families migrated out to western countries, chiefly the United Kingdom, for fear of retaliation in the newly independent nation-state. South Asians who continue to live there still hold an underlying fear of everyday crimes such as burglary and assault. According to Chebai, South Asians imbibed the British racist attitudes toward Africans, keeping their relationships and interactions with Africans functional and situational, though he considers Sikhs to be somewhat guided by the ideal of equality in the Guru Granth Sahib. Some of my Sikh interlocutors have expressed regret about the embeddedness of Sikhs in race hierarchies, while pointing to the change for the better in recent years and with the younger generations. According to Paul Younger (2010), social segregation between Asians and African tribes was initially supported by mutual need and expectation, but by the time of independence the African population largely felt that the racial divide was a means to Asian economic dominance. Some of my Sikh interlocutors have indicated that cultural and religious differences, rather than racist attitudes, have been the reasons for the limited nature of social integration. What all recognize is the certain mutual suspicion that exists across the racial divide, especially between sharply divergent economic classes. Thus, the intersectionality of race and class is an important factor in this tension.<sup>13</sup>

Sikhs have used the affective potential of their twin open-house sacred rituals of congregational musicking and communal dining to amplify a message of peace and inclusion, regularly organizing special events. “Kīrtan is always the base,” Satinder Singh Jabal tells me, as he describes the Ekta Samagam (lit. oneness gathering) that he was active in organizing in 2013. Lasting over three days, with akhand pāth, interfaith prayers, a candlelight vigil prayer for the disadvantaged, documentaries, and exhibitions, it culminated in a program of sabad kīrtan, *ardās* (chanted supplication), *hūkam* (lit. command; recitation of a verse from the Guru Granth Sahib, as guidance for the day), and langar. In 2008, during a violent period in Kenya with political tensions between rival leaders, Sikh gurdwāray around the country conducted a nationwide Prayer for Peace with recitations of sacred verses (Nairobi Star 2008).

While such events are organized regularly in the capital city of Nairobi, Gurdwara Makindu has carved out a special and permanent diasporic space of affective entanglements that I argue deepen the feeling of Kenya as home for Sikhs. The range of meaningful activities here are not only for Sikhs but also for the “locals” (as Africans are referred to by the Asians there), and these programs are ongoing and stable. The town of Makindu has no resident Sikh population within seventy miles. Beyond a few administrative staff and a granthī, the locals perform all the work of keeping the place running. Sikhs who come to the gurdwāra are all out-of-town visitors. For many it is a pilgrimage to a site that marks their

century-old presence in the land and an opportunity to see and perhaps read from the historic copy of the scripture. For some it is to celebrate a special occasion with akhand pāth. For others it is part of tourism. Since the gurdwāra is on the well-traveled main road from Nairobi to the coastal town Mombasa, it makes a convenient stop en route with free board and lodging, and a relaxing sacred soundscape. In fact, travelers of all stripes, including locals, stop for rest in an atmosphere of serenity. For the locals, the gurdwāra complex is a significant source of employment and ancillary economic opportunities, and very importantly, a range of social service programs.

*Sounding Peace and Oneness*

The central theme of oneness of humanity in the Guru Granth Sahib is sounded through the singing and chanting of the hundreds of sabad that elaborate on this ethical value. As an example of verses that speak to this theme:

ਦੁਜਾ ਕਉਣੁ ਕਹਾ ਨਹੀ ਕੋਈ ॥  
Whom should I call the Other, there is none.

ਸਭ ਮਹਿ ਏਕੁ ਨਿਰੰਜਨੁ ਸੋਈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥  
The flawless One permeates all. (Pause [Refrain])

...

ਧਰਣਿ ਗਗਨ ਨਹ ਦੇਖਉ ਦੋਇ ॥  
The earth, the sky, see no Other.

ਨਾਰੀ ਪੁਰਖ ਸਬਾਈ ਲੋਇ ॥੩॥ (Guru Granth Sahib, 223)  
In women, men, all, the Divine permeates. (Verse 3)

Among non-Sikhs, north Indians particularly find it easy to relate to the sacred verses due to some familiarity with the language. Additionally, the verses of Guru Granth Sahib include hundreds of songs from Hindu and Muslim saint-poets duly attributed to them. The approximately 6,000 scriptural songs repeatedly address the divine with names from the Hindu and Islamic tradition, such as Ram and Allah. These especially inspiring aspects of the scripture, along with the diverse musical styles of rendition,<sup>14</sup> create an inclusive devotional sound world, inviting all to rise above feelings of difference and notions of the Other and join in to create a sacred space and time of the unity of humanity.

Sikh devotees and others affected by these sacred soundings become sonic bodies affectively transmitting sensations of comfort and peace. In a 2013 blog post, an anthropology doctoral student identified as Kelly writes:

On multiple occasions that weekend, I caught myself feeling filled to the brim with happiness and contentedness. I have visited many gurdwaras, and

participated in many different activities within them, and I have always received warmth and welcome. But this was the first time I'd actually felt the *simran* [sacred chanting] wash over me during a prayer service. This time, I wasn't just a "participant observer." I actually felt something beyond my research and friendship interests.

At the level of action, the ethical value of oneness in the sacred verses finds enactment in the inclusivity of congregational worship and communal dining in which all congregants and visitors are treated equally. Scriptural verses are relayed on speakers in the langar hall as well to maintain an ambience of ethical ideals. Staff and visitors on the premise thus find themselves in an immersive atmosphere of sacred soundings aimed at bringing peace and togetherness among diverse people. Many among the local staff have learned several sacred verses that they recite flawlessly with pride, increasing their sense of ownership of the place and affective relationship to it.

#### *Social Service and Inclusion*

To this affective sonic mix has been added a substantial community service element in the form of a free hospital, with regular dental and eye clinics to serve the local African community. An African TV reporter, Shukri Wachu (2017), presents the views of the locals:

Residents of Makindu, a town named after the palm tree, or the Makindu tree in the local dialect of the Akamba community, say that the Sikhs have done a lot to help the locals in this small town, including building a hospital and providing free medical services.

The gurdwāra employs around two hundred locals who work in the kitchen, and as gardeners, cleaners, builders, and maintenance staff. In interviews conducted in Swahili by an African TV reporter, Wangari Nugunu (2016), staff members appreciate the extra financial support and other benefits they have received:

I have children in the school and university. I work in the temple and my children's education has been fully sponsored by the temple. The temple has sponsored so many local children for education and some of them have become doctors, teachers.

—Elizabeth Lazaro

Worshippers and visitors bring flour, sugar, vegetables to be used in the kitchen, and some also bring shoes for the kitchen staff.

—Ben Muya

The locals also derive income from their kiosks outside the compound, selling souvenirs, household goods, and fresh fruits and vegetables to the visitors. As Savinder Kaur Bhogal fondly remembers, "Only these kiosks sell very long wooden stirring spoons and ladles that I have brought to the UK."

Nugunu reports that locals Mohammed Athman and Robert Mungai stop regularly at the gurdwāra for an overnight break from dangerous nighttime traffic conditions. Additionally, Nugunu states, “If you fall sick, there is nothing to worry about. The Sikh Temple Hospital in Makindu will treat patients for free.”

In his interview with Shukri Wachu, custodian Amarjit Singh states, “There is no discrimination, and even now in our gurdwāras we have four doors.” He is referring to an architectural feature of the gurdwāra hailing back to the preeminent Harmandir Sahib in Punjab (popularly known as the Golden Temple) of building the worship room with four doors, one facing each direction. This feature symbolizes the open and inclusive policy of welcoming visitors from all backgrounds regardless of religion, caste, gender, and other social markers of identity, with no restrictions on participation in any of the congregational rituals.

Hundreds of visitors from diverse social backgrounds stop at Gurdwāra Makindu daily, welcomed by this open house policy (which is standard in all gurdwāray) combined with the high quality free accommodation, including accessible, in a lovely setting. Indeed, traditionally gurdwāray served as rest houses where weary travelers could get free board and lodging in a devotional setting. This is still the case wherever the gurdwāra resources allow. *Sevā* (selfless service) is an important Sikh ethic that combines with the ethic of oneness to undergird the continuation of these traditions. Regarding Gurdwāra Makindu, Shukri Wachu reports: “Even as the town of Makindu continues to grow, the policy at this holy institution is that the door will remain open for anyone in need.”

The open and inclusive practices at the gurdwāra has also inspired pilgrimage by non-Sikhs. An African journalist, Dauti Kahura (2009), writes about thirty-six-year-old Tony Kosgey who has been visiting since he was five. On a visit with his nine-year-old son, he told Kahura, “It is a tradition that runs through my family and I want my son also to experience and keep it.” Kahura also quotes another non-Sikh pilgrim, fifty-two-year-old Amin Premji:

The philosophy of The Makindu Temple is that all races come together to experience the sanctity of humanity in a holy sanctuary. Over time, that is what I have learnt from my coming here.

#### *What's in a Name: Kalasingha*

When conversing with Sikhs from Kenya or reading their blogs and other online postings, what stood out for me was a certain feelingfulness that they had about their lives in Kenya. Kenyan Sikhs relate with pride and affection to the term *Kalasingha*, by which African Kenyans refer to them. The story goes that in the early years of Sikh arrival in Kenya there was one Kala Singh, a merchant who was courageous enough to venture into remote areas to sell his goods. Along with his merchandise, he also carried with him medicines for common ailments such

as malaria and distributed them free of charge. Even to this day, African Kenyans refer to Sikhs as Kalasingha, a term that carries significant affective weight. An example can be seen in the spirit wear, with the phrase Kenyan Kalasaingh: Feel the Kenyan in You, and a logo that is a combination of the colors of the Kenyan flag and the Sikh symbol, *khandā*, a double-edged sword signifying the importance of melding the sacred and secular in everyday life.

At Gurdwara Makindu, one of the much beloved senior staff, Boaz Oyoyo, who worked there since 1979 and learned to speak Punjabi fluently as well as recite Sikh sacred chants, gained the affectionate nickname of Black Kalasingha, thus completing the affective circle. As he told Dauti Kahura in 2009:

The Kalasingas have been good to me. In the many years I have worked with them, we have forged a lasting friendship and a deeper understanding of each other.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS: A WAY IN

I hope that Kalasinghas carry on giving this wonderful service to the community forever.

Wangari Nugunu (emphasis mine)

Gurdwara Makindu wins hearts, of not only Sikh and other visitors, but also, and importantly, the locals, the indigenous African community in whose land Sikhs hailing from India have made a home. As a peaceful site of positive affective connections, pilgrimage here contributes to the making of Kenya as home for the approximately 20,000 Sikhs who currently live in Kenya (SikhiWiki 2014), and thousands of families who have migrated out.

This story of making home through affective entanglements is not one of proselytization and conversion, nor of musical hybridity or deep social integration, but one that sounds unity-in-difference, engendered by sacred sound and its ideals. Rather than a melting pot, Gurdwara Makindu is a site where diverse Kenyans can feel at home, with mutual acceptance and respect, and symbiotic co-flourishing. It is home in the sense of the lived experience of certain feelings.

With a history studded with oppression, exclusion, and displacement, Sikhs know the value of home and the pain from being Othered. Generational trauma is alive from the 1947 bloody partition of Punjab (and India), and the 1984 Indian state-sponsored pogroms with the genocide of thousands of Sikhs, rape of Sikh women, and vandalization of Sikh properties, followed by years of unquestioned police brutality and disappearing of Sikh male youth in Punjab. The tremendous rise and success of Hindu nationalism in India has left minorities including Sikhs living as the Other. Since the formation of the Indian state, the rate of migration of Sikhs to other countries has been rising steadily. Making a home in Western countries continues to be full of strife too, with hate crimes and speech against

turbaned Sikhs mistaken as Islamic terrorists in the post 9/11 world, and heightening of racism in the Trump era. For Sikhs in East Africa, late colonial and postcolonial nationalist sentiments continue to create a certain precarity.

At the same time, Sikhs are also resilient and enterprising people. Rhizomatic belonging, with scripture as center, and sacred sound as connective tissue, comes easily to them. As the custodian at Gurdwara Makindu says, “Wherever we settle, we build a gurdwāra.”

Gurdwara Makindu, however, is unique. It is a pilgrimage site in a diasporic land, in a town with no resident Sikhs, a historical testimonial to the century-old roots of Sikhs in the country, engendering a sense of belonging. Over and above, it is a place of value for the locals, a place of employment, free medical services, and educational grants, but also a place to visit for rest and inspiration. The site is thus a diaspora space of affective convergences, from activities that satisfy the needs of the Sikhs as well as the locals. Through such enduring practices that make the Kenyan soil home to them, and by overtly including the locals, even in myth-making, Sikhs foster feelings of Kenya as home. By creating an ecosystem of benefits that focuses equally on the needs of the local African Kenyan community, Sikhs gain affective inclusion in Kenya.

Sacred sound is central to this affective ecology and has been the very seed of its development. From devotional musicking under the shade of a tree to the sacred songs and chants in the worship and dining halls of a grand structure and compound, sacred soundings have been vital to Gurdwara Makindu. Their deep affective impact on Sikh devotees transforms them into transducers of positive affect for all visitors. The sounding of the principles of oneness, equality, and inclusivity in the sacred verses configures a space of inspired behavior. The peaceful sacred sounds engender an ambience of serenity for all.

Making such pilgrimage as part of the everyday actively produces home and belonging. The pleasing devotional soundings, the free delicious vegetarian food, and comfortable lodging invite visitors from diverse backgrounds to participate in an ecology of oneness. This pilgrimage, not to an original “homeland” but within a diasporic location, is a way in, to a space of belonging, to home.

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## NOTES

1. Due to the COVID-19-related restrictions, I was unable to travel to Kenya to conduct in-person fieldwork as I had planned to do in the summer of 2020. Hence, I have relied on online resources and long distance communications including phone calls, email, and text messages. More recently, the website of the pilgrimage site I am discussing, Makindu Sikh Temple has developed nicely. <http://www.gurdwaramakindusahib.com>
2. See Kaur (2018) for an argument of individual and fluid “worldings” engendered by sacred song, and Kaur 2019 for an elucidation of the multisensorial affective ecology of Sikh musical worship.
3. In the late colonial period, there developed in Punjab an institution (SGPC, Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee) to manage the operations of the regional gurdwāray, but its purview is limited to the three states that were all part of Punjab at the time—Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh.
4. The scripture was first scribed in 1604 with almost 6,000 sabad, and in 1704, 115 sabad were added. It was installed as the Guru of the Sikhs in 1708.
5. These are my own interpretive translations. I use capitalizations to indicate reference to a divine concept.
6. *Akhand pāth* in the worship hall at Gurdwara Makindu can be heard in a documentary, *My Journey: Homeland Kenya*, by the Sikh Channel, UK, on [www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=P4YF1Gt9DfE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=P4YF1Gt9DfE) at 17:51, accessed May 1, 2022.
7. On the problem of Hindu nationalism in Hindustan, see, e.g., Narula (2003).
8. See, e.g., Younger (2010).
9. A video of Sikh devotees lining up to view this scripture at Gurdwara Makindu, while chanting the divine name, can be seen at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzQAGupNsMA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzQAGupNsMA) at 3:00, with stills at 4:00, accessed May 1, 2022.
10. For an example of the kirtan style sung by hereditary singers going back to the nineteenth century at least, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldynNXZH8hE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldynNXZH8hE), accessed May 1, 2022. This style combines classical and folk instruments, such as the tãnpura, tabla, harmonium, dhōlak, and cymbals, as can be seen in the stills at 0:30 and 1:00. Singing begins at 0:53.
11. Views of the gurdwāra and its environs can be seen on [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNNGSEOhIxI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNNGSEOhIxI), accessed May 1, 2022.
12. See, e.g., Ghai (1966).
13. In a study of Sikh pilgrimage making in a contrasting “diasporic space” for Sikhs within India, Kristina Myrvold analyzes the development of Sikh pilgrimage sites in Varanasi, a prime Hindu holy city and pilgrimage center, as one of legitimizing minority presence in the locality through the construction of historical counternarratives that resist Hindu hegemony.
14. The typical contemporary style sung by a professional ensemble can be heard starting at 1:38 at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZuSn3L9xU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZuSn3L9xU), accessed May 1, 2022.

A youth ensemble with guitar can be heard at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkkaMaoVES4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkkaMaoVES4), accessed May 1, 2022.

A professional ensemble singing a sacred song of *vīr-ras* (heroic affect) in a more spirited style can be heard at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgtP49Tho64](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgtP49Tho64), accessed May 1, 2022.

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