Creating *Gurdwaras*, Narrating Histories: Perspectives on the Sikh Diaspora in Italy

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Religious Places in the Diaspora

1   The creation of places[1] of worship in the diaspora has been receiving considerable attention in social sciences.[2] Various authors have recognized how temples, churches, mosques or *gurdwaras* constitute important migratory places *in* which a sense of community is reproduced away from home, and *through* which 'a confident assertion of negotiated belonging' to the new context is promoted (Peach & Gale 2003: 487, Ansari 2002, Henkel & Knippenberg 2005). It is possible to identify different interrelated social dimensions of religious places in the diaspora. The first, as already mentioned, refers to the importance of places of worship in negotiating and transmitting migrants' culture and identity and in providing new generations with a link to their homeland traditions (Knott 1986, Ebaugh & Chavetz 2000, Hirvi 2010, Nesbitt 2007). The institutionalization of such places is of key importance in the production of a diasporic community, in emotionally and physically supporting the settlement of new arrivals, in initiating them in civic engagement and in providing them with local resources (Knott 2009a). As Vertovec (1992) notes in relation to British Hindus, migration also transforms the meanings of places such as temples, insofar as stronger congregational life and community attendance emerge in the new context if compared to India. Secondly, while places of worship reflect the intention of rooting the community in the new locality, they also design a *new geography of belonging* forged upon what Vertovec (1997) calls the 'triadic relationship' of displaced subjects with the place of settlement, the homeland and elsewhere in the diaspora. The construction and institutionalization of religious places is often supported by the activation of transnational networks through which funding, technical skills, architectural advice or ritual knowledge is transferred from one place to

another (Krause 2008, Sandoval 2002, Kahera 2002, Levitt 2003). Finally, and no less importantly, religious places also encounter 'the normalizing language' of local and national authorities that may see them as 'antithetical rather than complementary to the existing landscape' (Peach & Gale 2003:486, Garbin 2008). At the same time, the potential conflict generated by the presence of 'exotic places' in the urban social fabric may also be counterbalanced by the faith community's search for cooperative models of interaction with the public sphere in order to avoid self-segregation (McLoughlin 2005).

2   On the whole, current literature significantly highlights the role of religious places in connecting members of ethnic minorities across generations, in promoting continuity with different diasporic locations and in allowing migrants to enter the public sphere in receiving contexts. Little attention has been paid to how communities' internal differences are reflected in migration stories to provide a heterogeneous understanding of religious places. On the other hand, I explore how the *institutionalization of places of worship* is rendered meaningful in generational migration histories and how this process takes different forms in various Italian localities. By *institutionalization*, I refer here to the progressive shift from the private domain of the house to public places in the organization of collective religious activities, a process that produces changes and innovations in the way religious settings are understood and addressed (Baumann 2009). This process, I suggest, both results from and implies renewed relationships within and beyond the community and with urban contexts. I should point out that, in this context, I am not so much concerned with the analysis of the historical transformation of the *gurdwaras* per se. Instead, I focus on how religious places are ascribed shifting meanings according to the *biographical time of migrant experiences* in the new territory. In particular, I am interested in showing how the move from precarious legal and socio-economic conditions in the early years of migration to relatively more secure ones transforms migrants' relational approach to the *gurdwara.*

3   I argue that the institutionalization of *gurdwaras* results from a spatial move from large metropolitan areas to semi-urban and rural localities. This important shift reflects collective histories of transformation from illegality to legal status, as well as progressive emancipation from bonded labour conditions promoted by ethnic (and Italian) communities. As such, the spatial importance of religious places needs to be understood in relation to wider political and socio-economic dynamics that often frame conflicting intra-ethnic and interethnic relations. Given the high heterogeneity of Italian immigration contexts (Grillo & Pratt 2002) and the growing number of Sikhs in its localities (Bertolani *et al.* 2011), the following reflections may be said to apply to a context of interrelated urban and semi-urban location in central Italy. Although Silvia Sai's (2010) ethnography about the Sikh community in the north-eastern province of Reggio Emilia seems to partly corroborate my analysis, the specific link between out-urban moves and the institutionalization of *gurdwaras* may not be successfully applied to other regional realities. As such, the following analysis aims at contributing to the unpacking of an internally composite scenario rather than at providing a generalized model of *gurdwaras'* development at national level.

4   The following analysis draws on a total of four years' fieldwork with Punjabi Sikhs in the city of Rome and its rural surrounding area (1996-1998, 2002-2004, 2006) and in the nearby city of Terni (2007-2010).[3] I conducted a total of 46 semi-structured interviews in Italian and English[4] (38 men and 8 women) with Sikhs in Rome and 22 interviews (13 men and 9 women) in Terni. Twenty interviews were carried out with Italian religious and

secular representatives in Rome and Terni (city council officers, neighbouring associations, priests, politicians) to explore how the presence of an ethnically connoted religious community was received and acted upon by local urban society. My aim is not to develop a synchronic comparison between Rome and Terni, but rather a *multi-sited analysis* of how in different locations a religious place comes to be perceived according to personal and collective biographies of internal mobility. I followed migrants on their journey through Italy and tried to capture continuities and differences in the way they conceive the potential congregational character of *gurdwaras.* A multi-sited approach is deemed to be useful as a more mobile strategy, given the frequent and temporary movements of Sikhs on a country scale between Rome, neighbouring towns and rural areas, and as a way of grasping the differential meanings ascribed to *gurdwaras* in major cities and in the provinces.[5] As already mentioned, a multi-sited ethnography implies the acceptance of many loopholes and missing threads in the fabric of anthropological analysis (Marcus 1995, Candea 2007, Falzon 2009, Gallo 2009). In this respect, the hiatus between my multi-sited fieldwork in Rome and in Terni certainly raises questions about what changed in the Rome context during my subsequent research. This partiality, however, is also intrinsic to anthropological knowledge more generally, and it is related to the spatial arbitrariness and temporal limitations of any contextualized research (Candea 2007). At the same time, a recent analysis (Ferraris & Sai, forthcoming) indicates that the temporariness and precariousness of Rome as a context for establishing religious public places still prevail, making the need to move away from an urban context or to connect with less tense provincial dimensions a genuine reality. Moreover, despite the partiality of a multi-sited ethnography, I remain convinced that this strategy proves useful for mapping how a religious place can be linked to the dynamic and frequent movement between locations and become harnessed in people's life histories.

Sikh Diaspora in Italy

5   Indian migration to Italy dates back to the 1970s and today includes nearly 150,000 people, if we take into account only regular residents.[6] The number of Sikh Punjabis is estimated at about 115,000 and represents the largest Indian community.[7] Sikh migration to Italy was initially bolstered by restrictive immigration policies in the rest of Europe at a time when Italy lacked a consistent legal framework to deal with new arrivals. Direct immigrant flows from India grew exponentially in the aftermath of the Blue Star Operation and Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984.[8] These events certainly played a role in encouraging further migration to European countries and in the politicization of identities in the new context, although most Sikh migrants still migrated for economic reasons. From the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, many Sikhs finally reached Italy after extenuating journeys through Central Asia and Eastern Europe or through Turkey and Greece, which were often organised by unscrupulous intermediaries, causing migrants to run up huge debts.[9] The rise in Sikh immigration flows to Italy throughout the 1990s and the 2000s coincided with the codification of the first immigration laws which, on the one hand, granted migrants the right to education and to the health service while, on the other, reduced the possibilities for family reunifications and legally penalized individuals who were found to be on the national territory 'illegally'.[10] Up until the end of the 1990s Sikh migration remained predominantly male. As family reunification intensified at the time of the enactment of restrictive laws, the possibility of

bringing wives and children to Italy partly depended on the capacity to establish networks with Italian and Indian intermediaries and to pay for irregular entry and/or for forged documents. Yet due to an increase in job regularization in Italy, as well as to occasional legal acts of indemnity promoted by the Italian government,[11] some Sikhs have managed to obtain a residence permit, although only a minority has so far obtained citizenship. Internal spatial mobility remains a key feature of this community and a necessary strategy for job and life improvement. In this respect, Rome constitutes a place of transit rather than of permanent settlement (Bertolani 2005, Ferraris 2009, Gallo & Sai 2013) insofar as it offers limited job opportunities while remaining the nodal point for finding the 'right contacts' with regards to legal, family or employment issues. The move to fertile agricultural areas in the Centre-North of Italy allows the majority to find more secure jobs in the agricultural sector, in medium-large sized food industries of branded Italian products, or in larger northern companies. At the same time, *translocality*—that is the capacity to establish connections between different provinces and (urban and rural) municipalities throughout the Italian territory—remains an important issue for Sikhs. While a move from a central metropolitan area is looked upon favorably as guaranteeing a secure family life, maintaining social, religious and financial contacts across different locations on the national territory is highly valued as a source of power and prestige. Generally speaking, this network is consistent with the equally valued capacity to establish and maintain transnational connections. With regard to Sikh *gurdwaras* in Italy, recent ethnographies show how, among the *gurdwaras* that have been set up in rural or semi-urban Italian provinces, the possibility of calling upon a translocal and transnational network—that materialized, for instance, on the invitation of specialized and well-reputed ritual experts from Rome, Punjab or the UK—reinforces the claims to legitimacy and authenticity of the newly-spatialised faith community (Sai 2010; Gallo & Sai 2012).

6   Like other ethnic minorities in Italy, Sikh Punjabis are facing a national political situation today which up until recently was dominated by right-wing parties and the official xenophobic stance of the Northern League Party. The latter has traditionally seen religious pluralism and the possibility of an Italian 'multicultural society' as highly problematical. At the same time, the 'invasion syndrome' (Melotti 1997: 77)—national fear of being overwhelmed by what is perceived as a growing and uncontrollable cultural diversity driven by immigration—is sometimes mitigated by the focus on religious diversity as positively impacting Italian society and youth as long as Catholic values are not challenged.[12]

7   As Garau (2012) notes, despite the celebration of religious pluralism, both the State and the Catholic Church converge in a rather ambivalent way to promote policies to make adhering *to* or identifying *with* Catholic values a fundamental criteria for migrants' *integration.* While 'religious diversity' is still addressed in general terms in the national debate—and often targets Islam as the only alternative to Christianity—in many Italian provinces people have progressively come to terms with the specificities of Sikhism, Hinduism or other confessions (see Trulla in this issue). In this respect, Sikhs in local provinces have increasingly shaken off their cloak of invisibility to publicly assert their religious and ethnic identity, often in an ongoing dialogue with the Catholic Church (Sai 2010, Gallo & Sai 2012, Ferraris & Sai, forthcoming).

Gurdwaras, Power Relations and Urban Mimesis

8   The features that characterize *gurdwaras* in Punjab are maintained and transformed in Italy. As in their homeland, they are conceived as sites of spirituality and for the transmission of Sikh principles, yet they also contribute to enhancing community well-being and development. At the same time, it is precisely this flexible role of *gurdwaras* as a space of collective sociability that provides room for the emergence of novel and contextual purposes in relation to community needs. In addition, different diasporic situations dictate the temporal and spatial criteria that regulate the existence and the visibility of *gurdwaras* in the new context. In this respect, the social signification of *gurdwaras* among diasporic Sikhs in Italy seems to differ slightly from the one usually conferred on them in Northern Europe. Peach and Gale (2003) note, for instance, how the institutionalization of a Sikh place of worship in England follows on from the reconstitution of family units in the new context and the enhancement of migrants' basic conditions in terms of housing, labour and legal status (Clarke *et al.* 1990). In this respect, *gurdwaras* emerge as a gender—and family-integrated place, focused on religious, social and educational community activities. However, my ethnography leads me to consider how, for the first migrant settlers, the particular history of arrivals and internal displacement make *gurdwaras* places where emergency issues and survival strategies are dealt with, which well and truly preceded the reconstitution of family units. *Gurdwaras* initially emerged as spaces of *male hierarchical sociability*, where special power relations within and beyond the community were negotiated and contested. The first Sikhs in Rome settled after months of isolation and job exploitation in rural southern Italy where, as one informant put it, 'it was difficult to find somebody with whom you could share information and problems'. Their arrival in Rome did not free individuals from the exploitative control of brokers who, in order to recover their loans, guided men towards 'well monitored jobs' in the city and in the surrounding agricultural area. Piazza Vittorio, a square located near the central railway station (Termini), became the main assembly point where an ambivalent relationship—part solidarity part exploitation—was established with Sikh 'big men' (brokers).[13] Local neighborhood associations increasingly opposed the public visibility of 'men with the turban' and the supposed lack of safety measures for its inhabitants at night and during the day. On the whole, this is part of a wider tendency in Italian society to associate public visibility of 'ethnic differences' within urban spaces with illegality, male hyper-sexuality and a lack of security (Gallo 2006). Racism is often driven by a widespread representation of 'alien subjects' as responsible for having invaded and corrupted public spaces that are traditionally felt to be intimately Italian (Carter 1997). I suggest that this particular tendency in Italian metropolitan areas to see public places as areas subject to 'ethnic contamination', and as potential sites for inter-ethnic conflicts heightened the awareness of many Sikhs about their fragility as irregular subjects and drove them to adopt a form of urban mimesis. Indeed, in Sikh narratives, the city becomes a 'risky place' where any physical expression of ethnic difference has to be erased to avoid any conflict and violence. Urban mimesis implied the initial rejection of any religious dress code, by avoiding the turban and other distinctive elements of Sikh identity.[14] The same tendency is noted by Sai, who stresses how the abandonment of one or more of the five symbols is sometimes conceived by Sikhs as a necessary *detachment from religion* and as a strategy to avoid racist attacks (Sai 2010, Gallo & Sai 2012). The following extract from an interview with a Sikh man who

previously lived in Rome seems paradigmatic in this respect, as it reflects the feeling of constraint in displaying bodily elements considered as part and parcel of one's own identity before reaching Italy:

> In the first years here people looked upon me very badly, I used to wear my turban and my bracelet (...) I tried to tell them that I was a Sikh but they did not understand. Then one night in Piazza Vittorio some people attacked me (...) so I decided to remove everything and to cut my hair (...), for a long time I even stopped regarding myself a Sikh, as I was often scared (...). Even when the temple was open, I refused to go there for sometime. [15]

9   In the early 1990s this 'state of emergency'[16] prompted a group of around 30 Sikh men to rent an old warehouse in a semi-industrial area of the city suburbs where they could gather on a weekly basis. In Rome, the possibility of organizing home-based prayer rooms —a step identified by Peach and Gale (2003)[17] as preliminary to the subsequent public spatialisation of religion—proved impossible due to the shortage of accommodation experienced by many Sikhs. The creation of a warehouse-*gurdwara* in a suburban area met with no opposition from the local authorities, which preferred moving 'migrant life' and 'ethnic masculinity' to well-contained and less visible places. Throughout the 1990s this *gurdwara* remained fraught with tension created by the conflicting meanings ascribed to it. On the one hand, for many young Sikhs, the possibility of meeting there was regarded as a way of establishing ethnic contacts beyond the one-to-one relation with brokers, of counterbalancing exploitative power relations and of escaping racist attacks by Italians. On the other hand, for local 'big men', the *gurdwara* constituted a place for controlling the inflow of new arrivals and the organization of their social life. I came to understand the tension that surrounded the *gurdwara* during my first visit in 1997. I was accompanied by Abinash, a Sikh man, who was introduced to me by an Indian businessman who had a shop in Piazza Vittorio. Abinash came to pick me up with his wife and three children in a big car and, while I was not yet aware of his role as broker, I found it surprising that he was one of the few men I had met so far who could afford to bring his whole family to Rome.[18] In fact, our meeting contrasted strongly with our encounter with all the other Sikhs, mostly single men, who—on seeing me with Abinash—kept their distance and looked at me suspiciously. Bachan, the only person who approached me during the rituals asked me if I was there to recruit people for work contracts. When I explained the reason for my visit, he invited me to meet him on another occasion. At a subsequent meeting with Bachan, he explained that Abinash had 'made money' by bringing Sikhs into Italy illegally, that he was a powerful man within the *gurdwara* and that he had also succeeded in becoming the 'boss of the temple'. Bachan was firmly convinced that, other than the celebration of rituals, current *gurdwara* dynamics constituted a 'de-naturalization' of its meanings, since it had become a space for labour recruitment. Nevertheless, he had no alternative. His illegal status and his long errant life in urban places made the warehouse the only source of survival and of social contacts. His words perfectly describe how the *gurdwara* is embedded in conflicting histories of migration and intra-ethnic exploitation:

> There were not many places I could go when I fled from India and reached Italy. As I had no place to sleep and I had to pay back so much money to survive I used to switch between the square and the temple, and then from the temple to the square to beg for help (...) like a stray dog. On the square, some Italians beat me once because I was wearing my turban, so I removed it (...) as I didn't have any documents I didn't want to be too conspicuous (...). But the temple was not how I expected it to be, because it was difficult to get help because everyone was in the

same predicament; they had no money to lend, no job to offer me (...) and yet we still had to ask help from those people.[19]

10   Generally speaking, in the first stages of migrant settlement, *gurdwaras* are rarely described as spaces associated with religiosity or community solidarity. Instead, they are often portrayed as places where Sikhs cannot escape instrumental community relations and intra-ethnic power relations. For those who identify 'the temple' as a space where relationships can be built outside the control of 'big men', the *gurdwara* proves to be a deluding experience. While, in other diasporic contexts, the *gurdwara* is said to fuel an awareness of community sacrifice and displacement—by 'keeping alive the martial and martyr ideals through the stories of Gurus' martyrdom and military battles' (Nesbitt 2005: 59)—in these Sikh men's narratives, the *gurdwara* fails to nurture such a diasporic consciousness. A feeling of fragmentation and competition, as well as a sense of betraying a shared belonging emerge from the first accounts about the social meaning of the *gurdwara*. Ranjit Singh, who arrived in Italy in 1989 and today lives in Terni, recalls his years in Rome:

> Real Sikhs should never exploit their brothers (...) and certainly not in *gurdwaras* (...) not after all we suffered in India. I would have never expected all this when I fled Punjab (...) to be used by my own fellows (...). Some Italians also knew of our situation (...). One day an Italian policeman would come, another day an Italian working as a coastal guard (...) people said that they were dealing in some sort of traffic with (...) you know, the brokers (...) and that they were there to see what was going on (...) key Sikhs figures here were also encouraging them to make themselves important and to show us that 'they had contacts' (...) but no one dared to say all this at the time (...).[20]

11   As Vertovec (1992: 251) notes, 'the assumed idea of the temple as a community centre can be problematic in relation to the divergent roles and meanings the temple can hold for different groups'. While the author is mainly concerned with how different temples may be conceived by different Indian communities (in his sample: Gujaratis, Punjabis and Indo-Caribbeans), in the present context the different meanings ascribed to the temple— the expectations and the actual social life it generates—is what divides different sections of the Sikh population. Whereas, for powerful Sikh men, the *gurdwara* is a space of instrumental control over fellow Sikhs despite the rhetoric of 'collective solidarity', for other Sikhs the hierarchies that underpin its organization contradict the ideal congregational spirit which they expected to discover upon their arrival.

12   Since the end of the 1990s many things have changed in the spatial configuration of urban religious practices. During my subsequent field visits to Rome (2002-2006) I came to realize that persistent internal conflicts, alongside the dispersion of Sikhs in rural areas, have led to the formation of multiple *gurdwaras* in the Rome province.[21] As in the past, *gurdwaras* remain places where the urgent demands of newly arrived migrants are partly met by their fellow community and brokers. Others, such as the ones in the surrounding municipalities of Fiumicino or Fregene, have come to constitute relatively more stable places of settlement and of congregational worship. Interestingly enough, this has resulted not so much from family reunification processes—as happens in Northern Europe—but from the increasing emancipation of Sikhs from bounded labour relations and from financial debts that were originally contracted with brokers. In relation to the mushrooming of Sikh temples in urban and semi-rural milieus in the Rome province, Ferraris (2009: 315) notes how:

> The Sikhs in Rome seem to have been able to make use of the city in its broadest terms: by taking advantage of its urban shape and the opportunities offered in its

surroundings, they have created a unique landscape which is composed of a set of intersections between rural and urban scenarios, where religious and regional belonging blurs, and which are continuously re-shaped according to the urban and social dynamics in which the community is embedded.

13 The initial role of *gurdwaras* in hosting individual dependencies and intra-ethnic competition has been partly replaced—or is often merely overlapped—by the progressive institutionalization of small religious centers where, as Ferraris notes, ethnic belonging mingles with a growing sense of territorial belonging to the local context. At the same time, and aside from other Italian provinces, Sikhs in Rome have rarely promoted a stable and public visibility of *gurdwaras*.

Safer Places, Public Visibility and the 'Italian Neighbors' (2000s-today)

14 Moving outside congested and hostile metropolitan areas, I believe, allows a substantial transformation of *gurdwaras* from an emergency space of male sociability to a public space of community identity and congregational worship. The creation of more stable communities in semi-rural areas goes hand in hand with setting up a faith community concerned with the spatialisation of religion and its public recognition. Sai's ethnography (2010) clearly shows how the inauguration of the *gurdwara* in Novellara in 2000 (Reggio Emilia) constituted the first public event surrounding the creation of a Sikh religious place where Italian authorities and politicians were involved.[22]

15 This event, Sai (2010) suggests, had two main repercussions in terms of the relationships within the locality. Firstly, it signed the first successful attempt at territorialisation by a Sikh community and, in some ways, the official start of a recognised Sikh community in Italy. Secondly, the purpose of managing a religious building implied a number of institutional practices that transformed the religious community into a real institution— managed by a trust of Sikh members—within an emerging network of different Italian organisations: local administrations, parishes, police forces, health care institutions and other migrant groups (Say 2010). It is my conviction that the inauguration of the *gurdwara* in Novellara had an 'umbrella effect' among smaller Sikh communities in central Italy, such as the one that settled in Terni. Indeed, links between smaller *gurdwaras* and the religious centre in Novellara reflect the translocality previously described, insofar as the exchange of religious leaders, the mutual participation of devotees residing in these areas as well as the financial backing characterise the relations between these two provinces.

16 Indeed, during my subsequent fieldwork, I followed some of my Sikh acquaintances in Terni, a town of nearly 131,000 inhabitants located in the Southern Umbria District and a one-hour drive away from Rome. The city includes three industrial hubs and is surrounded by an agricultural area; it is considered by many of the 1,700 or so Sikhs living there as a safer place in terms of racial discrimination, women's sociability and better working conditions. Most of the men work in the industrial areas or in agriculture, whereas nearly 30 % of the women interviewed had found employment in the domestic or welfare industry. Among the Sikhs living in Terni, the joint process of the *gurdwara*'s visibility in Novellara and of improved working and legal conditions nurtured increased confidence in practising their religion and in becoming more assertive with respect to Italian society. In Terni, not only have many Sikh men gone back to wearing the turban and other symbols of Sikh identity but, by setting up the Association *Gurdwara Singh Sabha*

Sahib in 2002, a long negotiation process with the local authorities led to the inauguration in 2005 of a small temple within the city centre. The *gurdwara* in Terni is at present located in a side road near the main railway station and the central area where offices and high-street shops are situated. It is almost invisible beyond its immediate vicinity, but it suddenly becomes conspicuous to passers-by due to the inscriptions written in Punjabi and the pictures of Sikh gurus located at the entrance and to the daily gathering of small groups in the streets surrounding the temple in the late afternoon. The location of the temple deserves some attention as it reflects the demands by Sikhs representatives to free themselves of any previous marginalisation in suburban areas and to gain ready access to a central location. At the same time, this location reflects the local authorities' objective to control the daily gathering of ethnic minorities.

Figure 1. Entrance of the *Gurdwara* in Terni

Ester Gallo

17   For many Sikhs who knew the warehouse-*gurdwara* in the Roman suburbs, the new *gurdwara* marks a break with the past and symbolises a renewed sense of community spirit that followed years of being exploited. Although illegality remains a problem for many Sikhs, and particularly for newcomers, many of them have indeed managed to obtain a residence permit, a fact that contributes to making a more self-confident commitment to religious visibility and organizational activities. One of the members of the Sikh association commented to this effect on his attachment to the *gurdwara* in Terni:

> Here it is different because you do not have to hide, you can be proud of what you do and of your own people. See, in Rome there are still many problems … but many people have also left the big city and here you can build a better relationship with Italians, there is less conflict and racism towards us (…).[23]

18   The meanings ascribed to the new *gurdwara* in Terni are deeply entrenched in the emotional reminder of years of starvation and exclusion which, as a result of conflicting relationships with fellow ethnic communities and Italians, also prevented *gurdwaras* from being recognised as spaces where a diasporic consciousness could be expressed. However, in the provinces, two social dimensions of *gurdwaras—diasporic consciousness* and *local sense of belonging*—seem to develop hand in hand. In this respect, religious spatialisation both accompanies the re-acquisition of a faith-based collective identity as Sikhs, while also making Sikhism a 'communication project' that can be understood beyond the ethnic group.

19   Their confidence in practising their religion (Sai 2010) and in 'spatialising' its visibility should also be conceived as a product of a process of mutual influence between Sikhs and Italians in framing a particular image of Sikhism. Indeed, one wonders under what circumstances, in a country where religious pluralism is perceived as problematical, a place of worship can become acceptable at local level. Interviews with Italians living in Terni point to the fact that, thanks to various elements, religious differences are perceived as admissible in the everyday-life of the locality. The reconstitution of family life, acceptance of the limited job opportunities and the invisibility of any militant expression of religion are indeed among the most important factors, as they significantly contribute to minimizing the representation of migrant men in public spaces as 'lazy, hyper-masculine and potentially aggressive'. It is easy to track this relatively widespread representation in the way the neighborhood is related to the institutionalization of the *gurdwara* in Terni. In the following statement by a woman living near the *gurdwara*, 'the Indian church' contrasts with other public spaces and becomes the result and proof of Sikhs' positive integration in the local social fabric:

> These people are harmless, you barely see them *around* except during their festivals, which in any case are well organized, and they ask permission in advance (...) otherwise they are hard-working people, they have their families and they are so religious (...) and I think their religion is very peaceful (...) very similar to ours. They are not like Muslims who pretend to remove the cross from schools or to build mosques wherever they like (...) these people here have done everything very humbly and they respect our religion and traditions (...) I am not disturbed by this presence, they work and pay taxes, they do not commit crimes, so why shouldn't we accept these Indian churches here?[24]

20   Since 2001, for Sikhs, bridging the gap between Catholic institutions and the faith community has also meant a strategy of distancing themselves from Islam, which has partly been achieved through the promotion of their religion as peaceful, family-orientated and easily adaptable to different national and religious contexts (Sai 2010, Moliner 2007). The promotion of a reassuring image of Sikhism by local Sikh representatives also aims at establishing an ecumenical relationship with Catholicism, by highlighting the importance of 'baptism' in Sikhism (taking *amrit*)[25] and also the proclivity of many Sikhs to visit Catholic churches and to find spirituality there (see Trulla, this issue). Overall, the institutionalisation of *gurdwaras* as important spaces of diasporic consciousness and cultural production has enabled Sikhs to move on from the initial stages of invisibilisation. Yet, this process has certainly been selective and partial, insofar as the public spatialisation of religious sites and the production of knowledge about Sikhism have also meant the conscious obliteration of all aspects of Sikh history that might make this community easily seen by Italians as 'militant'. Although reference to Sikh militant history is often made in *gurdwaras* during the Sunday celebration, major

aspects concerning Khalistan and other turbulent aspects of Sikh history are usually left unmentioned in public spaces and remain confined to the privacy of homes. Indeed, while many Sikhs keep a picture of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (Sikh secessionist leader) and other images of militant Sikhs in their houses, similar images are not found in the *gurdwaras,* nor is their history recounted in public. At the same time, Sikh efforts to promote a redefined knowledge of their religion and to make the *gurdwara* an accepted space in the urban fabric have met more often than not with processes of simplification and reductionist exoticization by local Italians. Many people in Terni remain not only unaware of Sikhism but tend to represent it in ways that ascribe importance only to the *aesthetic manifestations* of its religious difference. This tendency was evident during the attendance of two public authority representatives—a city council responsible for interreligious dialogue[26] and a local politician from a centrist party—at a public lunch organised by the *gurdwara.* For the occasion, a *langar* (community kitchen) had been set up in a square near the *gurdwara.* Before the meal, one of the two Italian representatives addressed the Sikh assembly by welcoming 'a community with colourful dresses and exquisite food, which was able to adapt to our context and to coexist peacefully with our people'. This statement was received by Sikhs in various ways. While some *gurdwara* representatives subscribed to this simplistic representation, others noted with disappointment that beyond the 'dress and food' aspect, local people knew nothing about Sikh history and religion. As P. Kaur, a young woman involved in the *Gurdwara Singh Sabha Sahib* association, put it:

> People here like us without knowing even what the Guru Grant Sahib is, or our history, or why there are Sikhs living everywhere, the sacrifice our people made for us and why we escaped India. They think we are Hindus and that's fine for them as long as we are not Muslim!![27]

21   During a subsequent meeting in the *gurdwara*, different positions confronted each other over the possibility of adopting a more assertive and informative strategy about Sikhism and the Sikh diaspora. Interestingly, long-established migrants rejected the possibility of adopting a more critical attitude towards local authorities, and motivated this position by evoking the years of difficulty as marginal subjects and their prolonged struggle to obtain public recognition. By contrast, newly arrived migrants and part of the younger generation were keen to integrate the temple within a strategy to heighten public awareness of all the historical and contemporary features of the Sikh diaspora. A critical view was also expressed regarding the role of Catholic institutions in Terni. While Sikh efforts to establish a dialogue with the Catholic Church—sometimes by inviting Catholic representatives to the *gurdwara* and by agreeing that their children be given a Catholic education in Italian State schools[28]—local Catholic representatives have seldom reciprocated by actively learning more about Sikhism in terms of its history and its faith community.

Conclusion

22   The aim of this article was to nuance the overall monolithic representation of sacred places as sites where diasporic communities rebuild themselves by engaging in religious as well as social activities. Although this dimension of solidarity and inter-generational transmission certainly plays a key role in the way Sikhs in Italy conceive *gurdwaras*, my ethnography also brings me to consider the relevance of intercommunity discrepancies

and conflicts—as laid out in migrants' biographies and life histories—in the way a religious place is envisaged and experienced. My intent was to highlight how different temporal and geographical locations of migrants lead the latter to conceive *gurdwaras* in different, and often conflicting, ways. The link between migrants' biographical time and religious spatialisation proves to be of use in mapping the way in which religious places tend to take on unpredictable meanings in relation to different localities and histories. I hope to have shown that in central Italy, setting up *gurdwaras* as places where *diasporic social forms* and *diasporic cultural production* can be nurtured (Vertovec 1997)—that is where special ties to community history and geography may be preserved while initiating a creative dialogue with the host society—depends on a collective move from large metropolitan areas to semi-urban or rural settlements. This shift is made meaningful in generational histories by the progressive (albeit still partial) individual withdrawal from ongoing situations of irregularity, and from exploitative labour relations with Italians and fellow Sikhs. Indeed, Sikh generational experiences of *gurdwaras* tend to highlight a contrast between the way this religious place was experienced in Rome and later on in Terni. Generally speaking, in Roman *gurdwaras*, people's expectations of diasporic solidarity and of mutual support are often dashed by big men's patronage and control. Hence *gurdwaras* are interpreted by many as places where ambivalent and instrumental relations are established rather than places where religious and social community life can flourish. Indeed, it is in smaller cities that exploitative relationships tend to be partly replaced by better legal and working conditions, alongside the setting up of larger family units. As in other European locations, the municipality or the provincial level is the real context in which migrants adopt politics of difference and establish a dialogue with the local polity by claiming religious visibility (Gallo forthcoming).

23   Equally important in the framing of different understandings of *gurdwaras* is the ambivalent relationship established by Italian civil and political society between *public places*, *gender* and *security*. In this respect, the lack of any official promotion of *gurdwaras* that characterizes Sikhs' experiences in the 1990s (and partly today) in large metropolitan areas responds to the search for an urban mimesis—symbolized by concealing ethnic and religious symbols in public places—and to the need to avoid racist attacks. It is also informed by the persistent indifference of local political and civil authorities to the Sikh religion in cities like Rome (Ferraris & Sai, forthcoming). In the 2000s, with the expansions of Sikh communities to the Italian provinces, we have witnessed greater confidence in asserting religious belonging and in claiming the right to public places for setting up official *gurdwaras*. Although racism is far from non-existent in Italian provinces, both my ethnography of Terni and the one of Reggio Emilia by Sai (2010) tend to highlight how a strategy of mimesis and fear are 'smothered' in relation to the public (both personal and institutional) display of religious identity. While the official spatialisation of Sikhism in Italy reflects the willingness of migrants to achieve public recognition, this process also results in religious places experiencing the regulation/ influence of different authorities and civil society at municipal and provincial levels. As such, migrant communities are both encouraged and actively involved in promoting a representation of their religion that *can be understood* by outsiders. In this respect, Sikh Punjabis have increasingly abandoned their politics of 'ethnic mimesis' to conceptualize *gurdwaras* as sites through which respectability and interethnic relations could be ideally built through a dialogue with mainstream Catholicism. Yet, for new generations, while Sikhs are aware that Italians downplay the complexity of Sikhism to portray a 'folkloric

culture', sections of the community react by highlighting the distinctive character of their religion and by stressing the importance of its own norms and orthodoxies. On the whole, there is a need to develop a better understanding of how a religious place comes to be emotionally embedded in generational histories of migration, and to map how ideal expectations and lived reality confront each other.

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NOTES

1. A short explanation of the use of concepts such as *place* and *space* must be given here. As Massey (1994) and Knott (2009b) show, the idea of 'place' has recently been questioned by postmodern geographers for still being associated with bounded ideas of locality. On the other hand, 'space' refers more to the openness of global flows and movements. Along these lines, Simon (2008) uses the second term to refer to the much broader and more fluid space traversed by a migrant. Yet, both Massey (1994) and Knott (2009b:158-59) concord in avoiding the dismissal of the concept of *place* in the analysis of contemporary transnational movements insofar as 'places remain part of dynamic and relational spaces, the latter conceived in social, mental and physical terms'. In this context I follow Knott in arguing how the study of religious spatialisation in the diaspora cannot prescind from the analysis of the location of religion in places. In referring to *gurdwaras* I will mainly use the term *place* to refer to the complex and locally

spatialised set of religious, social, political and economic activities that define Sikh life in the diaspora. At the same time, my ethnography leads me to consider *gurdwaras* as both sites through which a relationship with the locality is sought and valued by migrants, and places which belong to a wider and shifting spatial configuration of translocal and transnational relations that are often experienced and sometimes imagined.

2. I wish to thank Aurélie Varrel, Tristan Bruslé and three anonymous referees for their guidance and useful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

3. My research also involved Syrian Christian and Latin Catholic Malayali migrants from Kerala. Comparative aspects between these two communities will not be discussed here.

4. I worked on occasion with a Sikh translator, especially during the interviews with Sikhs - often newcomers from Punjab - who did not speak any English or Italian.

5. Italy is currently divided in 110 provinces, which constitute a local (urban) political and administrative authority in charge of controlling a number of smaller cities, towns and villages. Provinces have some administrative power (and limited legislative power) over the labour market (via training and enrollment centers for Italians and migrants), the education system (via education authority that supervises school activities and curricula) and urban planning/ regulation. They are, with urban and rural municipalities, key sites where national immigration and multicultural politics/policies are enforced while also being counterbalanced by a certain degree of local autonomy and by differential encounters between immigrants, on the one hand, and civil and political society, on the other. In this respect, the way immigration is dealt with in the Rome province may vary considerably from the way the same issue is dealt with in provinces such as Milan or in smaller cities like Terni. This of course may also depend on the party-coalition elected in a specific Province.

6. According to official data (Istat 2012), if we consider only documented immigrants, the Indian population amounts to about 150,000. Sikhs account for nearly 115,000 units. At present Indians constitute the 8th biggest migrant community in Italy after Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans, Chinese, Ukrainians, Filipinos and Moldavians. Between 1993 and 2010, the Indian population in Italy evolved at an annual average growth rate of 66.3%, one of the highest in Europe, and it is today mainly concentrated in the Northern regions of Lombardia and Reggio Emilia (Lum 2012).

7. The other being Malayali Christians and Malayali Christians (20,000 people).

8. Between 3rd and 6th June 1984 Indira Gandhi—Prime Minister of India at the time—ordered the military occupation of the Sikh Golden Temple of Amritsar on the premise that the Sikh political secessionist movement of Khalistan was hiding there and amassing arms. The operation led to the killing of a number of civil victims, estimated between 500 and 1,500 people. On 31st October of the same year, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. The act was interpreted within the Indian polity as a vindictive reaction by Sikhs as well as an act of betrayal to the Indian nation. As a result, massive attacks on Sikh civilians spread throughout India, and particularly in the larger cities of the Centre-North. As many authors have observed (Dusenbery 1995), the relationship between Sikhs, their territory (Punjab) and their history has often been fraught with conflict, divisions and struggles. Today, critical moments in history are officially and informally recalled to forge a relatively shared sense of loss and martyrdom which, in turn, promotes the Sikh 'diasporic consciousness' (Vertovec 1997).

9. At the end of the 1990s, according to my data, the average debt contracted by Sikhs for being ferried to Italy ranged between 10 million and 18 million lira (5,000 to 9,000 Euros). Subsequent interviews held between 2005 and 2009 indicate that this sum has in many cases increased to 10,000 - 22,000 Euros (per person).

10. The two major legal provisions are the Turco-Napolitano Law (39/1990) and the Bossi-Fini Law (189/2002). The latter limited both the possibilities of obtaining a residence permit to migrants who already held a regular job in Italy and the possibility of family reunification. Since the 2000s many Sikhs who have been living and working in the country for more than twenty

years have found themselves to be in an illegal situation if they lose their job and are unable to find another one shortly afterwards.

11. In Italy, *Sanatoria* is a temporary legal provision allowing a restricted number of migrants, who are on the national territory illegally, to regularize their position and to obtain a residence permit.

12. Italy has traditionally been a Catholic country. According to recent data, nearly 87.8% of Italian citizens claim to adhere to this religion, while only 36% define themselves as practising Catholics. The other national religious communities are, in descending order, the Christian Orthodox Church (1,300,000), Sunni Muslims (1,200,000), Protestants (700,000), Buddhists (160,000), Hindus (115,000), Sikhs (115,000) and Jews (30,000). With the exception of the Jewish community, growing religious diversity is primarily the result of immigration flows which started at the end of the 1970s (Istat 2011).

13. I am using the concept of 'big men' here to point out the exploitative yet paternalistic relations brokers establish with Sikhs throughout their journeys to and within Italy.

14. The five distinctive elements of Sikh religion are: *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kanga* (a wooden comb), *Kara* (metal bracelet), *Kachera* (cotton undergarments) and *Kirpan* (a curved sword).

15. Interview by author, Terni, September 2009.

16. To some extent, this 'state of emergency' persists, and in some cases it has even worsened in Rome today. This is partly due to the fact that, after the 2002 Bossi-Fini Law, the percentage of irregular migration—both resulting from irregular entry and from legal residence permits coming to the end of their validity—increased. For Sikhs who live in Rome, where the public presence of immigrants is felt to be more problematical, this irregular status fuels a sense of insecurity and a major dependence on brokers to secure a job and obtain the relevant documents. In the city, it is also more difficult to find prolonged and regular employment, whereas the northern provinces offer more opportunities in small firms or in the agricultural sector.

17. Peach and Gale (2003) identify—with reference to the British context—four stages in the negotiations between minority faith groups and the city planning system: 1. Tacit change and planning denial, which results in religion being practised in informally arranged prayer rooms; 2. Search for larger premises, often accompanied by the transformation of private houses or abandoned churches into places of worship; 3 and 4. Building of Minarets, Domes and Hindu Towers (2003).

18. The last major legal change—the Bossi-Fini Law of 2002, promoted by the right-wing parties *Alleanza Nazionale* and *Lega Nord*—has also restricted the possibility of family reunification and has shortened the validity of the legal residence permit, making it more difficult and costly to obtain. Not only have bureaucratic costs of family reunification increased, but the sponsor/relative living in Italy who wants to bring over his/her family has to meet higher salary requirements which proves difficult for many Sikhs, particularly in the early stages of their migration experience in the country. This has caused a considerable number of migrants to hesitate between determined periods of regularity and prolonged periods of irregularity.

19. Interview by author, Rome, May 1997.

20. Interview by author, Terni, October 2008.

21. Rome province is the most populated one in Italy, with 4,233,653 inhabitants (Istat 2010).

22. In the past, the opening of *gurdwaras* may have been the occasion for an informal inauguration, but this practice was rare in Rome throughout the 1990s and only involved fellow ethnic communities. The few inauguration ceremonies should be conceived as part of the *urban mimesis'* strategy.

23. Interview by author, Terni, September 2009.

24. Interview by author, Terni, December 2010.

25. The *amrit chakna* (literally taking *amrit*) is the ceremony through which—with the use of holy water—a Sikh is initiated into the Khalsa Brotherhood.

26. Responsabile comunale per il dialogo inter-religioso.

27. Interview by author, Terni, August 2010.

28. In all Italian state schools, Catholicism in taught for ½ hour per week, unless parents make a formal request to withdraw their children from this class. Although the law allows this, the act is sometimes frowned upon by teachers.

ABSTRACTS

The creation of places of worship in the Indian diaspora has received due attention in social sciences. The current literature has rightfully highlighted the role of religious places in connecting ethnic minority fellows across generations, in promoting continuity with different diasporic locations and in allowing migrants to enter the public sphere in receiving contexts. A minor attention has been paid to how communities' internal differences and potential conflicts are reflected in migration histories and how this informs heterogeneous understanding of religious places. The article explores how the establishment of Sikh *gurdwaras* in Central Italy is made differently meaningful in generational migration histories and how this process takes different forms in various Italian localities. It particularly focuses on how religious places are ascribed shifting—and often conflicting—meanings according to the *biographical time of migrant experiences* in the new territory. The article argues that the public recognition of gurdwaras partly results from Sikh migrants' spatial move from large metropolitan areas to semi-urban and rural localities. This important passage reflects collective histories of transformation from irregularity to temporarily regular status, as well as a progressive emancipation from bonded labour conditions promoted by ethnic (and Italian) fellows.

INDEX

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