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[THE WEARING OF DASTAR IN SIKHISM AND ITS RELATION WITH AMRIT SANSKAR CAREMONY]

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Abstract

In the religion of Sikh, wearing the turban or the dastar is a religious practice that is a symbolic proof of their faith to the Sikh Guru's teachings and their holy book. The dastar carries its own distinguished characteristics in terms of the way it is worn, its measurements and colours. It completes the Sikh dresscode or uniform, known as Panch Kekaar or the 5Ks, that is an integral part of their identity. Nevertheless, not all Sikh followers wear the dastar. This depends on individual's willingness to undergo a baptism ritual, known as the amrit sanskar. The dastar-wearing Sikhs who have requested for amrit are called amrit-dhari; they are true Sikh followers who adhere to the teachings of their Sikh teachers. One of the objectives of this study is to provide information to the multi-racial society in Malaysia, especially the Muslim society, concerning the wearing of dastar in Sikhism and its relation with baptism. Through this information, it is hoped that a society that is tolerance and have mutual respect for each other, irrespective of race and religion, as aspired by the concept of 1Malaysia, is bome. In this study, textual analysis method is adopted to retrieve information on the Dastar and the amrit sanskar ritual. In addition, various m various references in relation tho the Sikh relion were a;so made.

Keywords: Dastar, Sikhism, amrit satif, panch kekaar.

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INTRODUCTION

Compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Sikh community is an ethnic minority that originates from Punjab, India. The Sikhs have their own history, culture and language that

are separate and distinctive from the Tamil community who also originate from India. Compared with the vast studies on the Tamil community, studies on the Sikh community in the fields of social science and religious comparisons, have failed to invoke much interest and response. In fact, the responses are minimal, which suggests scarcity of resources (Dali, 2002). Due to this limitation, many people, especially the Muslim community, are still very much ignorant of Sikh-based teachings and the Sikh community.

Amongst the Sikh teachings that need to be understood, especially amongst the Malaysian society, is the adornment of the *dastar* (turban) by the Sikhs. In Malaysia, for the Muslim majority population, the wearing of *dastar* may suggest some similarity with the Muslim turban. Yet, the *dastar* and turban have distinctions in terms of their shapes, measurements, colours, and the way they are worn (Md. Zain, 2012).

Another important aspect that is not known to the general Malaysians, especially the Muslims, is the Sikh baptism. This practice may not be familiar to Muslims, having associated the term baptism to only Christianity. Nevertheless, this practice does not only exist in Christianity, but also Sikhism and Judaism. For the Muslims, baptism may be understood as a cleansing ritual using water. However, the ritual differs from one religion to another in its purpose, philosophy and manner. The terms used in these religions are also different: ‘Baptist’ is synonymous with Christianity, whilst *wuduk* and *al-Ghusl* (bathing) are associated with Islam, and *tevilah* with Judaism (Christine, 2007), whilst in Sikhism, it is known as *amrit sanskar* (Sarjit, 2008) or *Khande di Pahul*, which means ‘Baptism with a Sword’ (Fields, 1976). Both the *dastar* and *amrit sanskar* in Sikhism have a close relationship because it creates a path for Sikh followers to approach their god (Sarjit, 2008).

One of the objectives of this study is to create a Malaysian society who are tolerant and accepting of other religious beliefs and teachings. By expanding knowledge on this matter, it may also facilitate cooperation, not just between people of different faiths, but also between the minority and majority ethnicities in Malaysia. This is in line with the Malaysian government’s intention to unite all religions and races under the 1 Malaysia banner.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

To better understand the wearing of *dastar* and the *amrit sanskar* ceremony in Sikhism, several relevant studies were referred to. In Md. Zain’s article (2012) entitled “A Comparison Study on Wearing the *Dastar* in Sikhism with the Islamic Turban”, he discussed several similarities and differences between the *dastar* and turban in terms of wearing it, its shape, measurements and colours. Md. Zain (2012) also emphasised the importance of understanding this in order to promote a society that is tolerant of different faiths in a Malaysian pluralistic society. Another article entitled “Implementation of Panch Kekaar and Khalsa in Sikh Society in Kelantan, Malaysia” by Md. Zain et al. (2011) also discussed *dastar* briefly that focused on implementing Panch Kekaar (5K or five symbols) and Khalsa (The Khalsa is distinguished by a baptism ceremony called the *amrit sanskar*), in the Sikh community in the state of Kelantan. Although *dastar* is mentioned in brief, the article linked all three (3) important elements in Sikh religion.

In the article “United Sikhs Files Criminal Complaint Against Punjab Police for the Unlawful Removal of a Sikh’s Turban and Demands Accountability From the India

Government" (PR Newswire New York, March 31st, 2011), it focused on the position of *dastar* and the noble act of wearing it amongst the Sikh followers. McClatchy's (2009) work entitled "North Texas College Students Try on Turbans, New Perspective" explored the role of the turban as a mark of solidarity among the Sikhs. It became so important that the college students even held a Turban Day to expose the unique features of the turban to the society. Mschafer (2010) in "Sikh Soldier Allowed to Wear Turban" studied Sikh soldiers in the American Army who were permitted to wear turban in their line of duty. Although all three sources discussed *dastar*, none discussed the *amrit sanskar* ceremony and its relation with the adornment of the *dastar*.

A thesis by Md Zain (2001) entitled *The Symbols of Sikhism in Kelantan: A Critical Study According to Islamic Teaching* focused on the symbols of Sikhism, known as *Panch Kekaar* and its practice amongst the Sikh community of Kelantan. The important roles of the *dastar* and the *amrit sanskar* ceremony were mentioned for its connection with *Panch Kekaar*. This thesis is important as it serves as an initial point of reference for this study.

On the other hand, studies conducted by Sikh researchers on *amrit sanskar* has been general. A study entitled "Understanding Indian Religious Practice in Malaysia" (Savinder & Gopal 2010) uncovered the position of religion for permanent Indian Malaysian citizens. For the Indians, religion is an integral part of their life, therefore a religious conversion is regarded a betrayal of their identity, culture, family and race. Where the Sikh community is concerned, the polemic of religious conversion emerges amongst the *Kesh-dhari* and *Sahij-dhari* (terms that will be elaborated further in this study), and is especially common amongst the younger generation who questioned the relevance of wearing the 5K in modern times (a practice that will be elaborated further in this study). The move from Sikhism as a universal religion to a cultural religion is one of the reasons why Sikh people betray their own identity. Savinder and Gopal's (2010) article is useful as a source of reference on the groups called *Amrit-dhari*, *Kesh-dhari* and *Sahij-dhari* who emerged from the *amrit sanskar* ceremony in Sikhism.

Sarjit's (2007) article, written in Malay, entitled "Participation of the Punjabs in a Community Development Programme: An Ethnographic Study in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah" discussed the effectiveness of community development programmes, organised by the Kinabalu Singh Sabha (KSS) Association, for the Punjab. The survey was conducted on the *samelan* (youth camp) and Punjab education. Sarjit pointed out the obstacles that needed to be overcome to empower the Punjabis in Kota Kinabalu in forming their Sikh identity or observing Sikh teachings. Although this study greatly discussed the Punjab community, the writer made no mention of *amrit sanskar*. Another article by Sarjit (2008) "The Role of Gurdwara in the Formation of the Sikh Identity in Malaysia: Between the Ideals and Practice" focused on the role of the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) in shaping the identity of the Sikh community in Malaysia from the perspective of Sikhism, and through interviews, compared its practice amongst the Sikh community. Although the focal point of this writing lies on the role of the *gurdwara*, the writer also delved into the history of the religion and the *amrit sanskar* ceremony in the Sikh community in brief.

There are also studies by Western researchers like Mcleod's (2008) "The Five Ks of the Khalsa Sikhs"; a study that shed light on wearing the turban and the 5Ks as the Khalsa official attire. Turban wearing has created confusion in the Western community especially after the September 11th incident causing them to confuse Sikhism with Islam. This article is fascinating

as the writer does not only discuss the origin of the 5ks and their role to the Khalsa Sikhs, but he also drew a connection of the 5ks with the situation in Punjab and countries like New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The writer also discussed the 5ks in the amrit-dhari, kesh-dhari and sahih-dhari contexts. This article is suitable as a source of reference for a study on the 5Ks in Sikhism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied in this study was the textual analysis of these texts in the form of books, articles, theses and past research related to the wearing of the Dastar and Amrit Sanskar ceremony. By utilizing this method of textual analysis, it helps this study to see to what extent its relationship with the wearing of the Dastar and Amrit Sanskar ceremony which is practiced in Sikhism.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WEARING DASTAR IN SIKHISM

Dastar is one of the oldest and renowned symbol for Sikh followers. Dastar is worn by all followers, irrespective of gender or age, to reflect their Sikh identity. Nevertheless, not all followers wear the dastar daily, and those who do may also be influenced by other factors like a family or community obligation, or even coercion without truly understanding the cultural and religious purpose of the dastar (Md. Zain, 2012). The significance of wearing dastar is its close ties with the five symbols of Sikhism, known as Panch Kekaar, which is the official Sikhs dress code. It is also known as the 5Ks, which are the symbols' initials: Kesh (hair), Kara (bracelet), Kachera (trousers), Kirpan (sword) and Kangha (comb). For the devout Sikhs, the symbols signify true brotherhood and kinship, preserved through the establishment of Khalsa, a Sikhism holy group (Md. Zain, 2001).

Kesh (hair), the most important symbol, must be practised in their daily lives. It is also the most closely associated symbol to the wearing of dastar. Dastar is worn as a mark of respect to preserve the respectability of Kesh. It also serves as proof of their loyalty to Sikhism teachings, as only the courageous and loyal would be willing to keep their hair long. The amount of loyalty is translated into the act of wearing the dastar (Salim, 1985). As the dastar assumes a respectable role and highly regarded in Sikhism, those who refused to wear it will be regarded as 'deviants' from the religious norms. It is even regarded a religious offence if the wearer moves the dastar from their heads in a rough manner. It is therefore the parents' responsibility to train Sikh children to wear dastar from the age of five so that they are instilled, from young, a deep feeling of respect towards it (al-Alusiy, 2001).

Indeed, dastar wearing in Sikhism serves its own purpose and philosophy. For example, with it, they are able to recognise one another anywhere they go. It also bonds the Khalsa together and evokes a sense of pride for belonging in a prestigious group (Sabha, 1969). Furthermore, it also stands as a testament of their faith: a yardstick to evaluate their level of loyalty and their adherence to the religion. This test carries its own significance as the task of being true to one's own religion is never easy (Salim, 1985). Sikh women, on the other hand, adorn scarves, known as dupatta, to cover their heads (Darshan, 2009). Nevertheless, there are disadvantages to being visible because those who are willing to put on the Dastar, keep long

hair and beard also make it easy for foes and enemies to detect them (Salim, 1985).

The wearing of dastar not only entails twisting a cloth around the head but more importantly, it differentiates the religion from the rest through this distinctive identity. This identity was a gift from the last Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh on the Baisakhi Day in 1699 to Sikh followers as a symbol of respect and nobility. This practice also demonstrates their promise and pledge to affirm the teachings of Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Gobind Singh and their Holy Book, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Md Zain, 2012).

According to the historical development of Sikhism, Dastar has become part of an important spiritual practice. This is perceived through its position as a crown and as Man's entrance into the realm of spirituality. This gateway is protected by the hair that acts as an antenna to protect the head from the sun. For Sikhs who do not cut their hair, they are believed to be restoring some amount of energy on their head or the front side on the head (the anterior fontanel) where their solar centre is located. For women, they have two solar centres: one on the front-side of the head (the anterior fontanel) and another on the back of their head (the posterior fontanel). Therefore, the hair, kept in the Dastar, will emit energy and help them to retain focus on their spirituality. Most importantly, they believe that the energy given by their Guru is sacred. When they preserve it, the Guru's energy will linger in their lives and with it, the Guru's life experience is channelled through to them. To help sustain this energy, they need to cover their heads with Dastar (<http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/WhyTurbans#SikhIdentity>).

THE MEASUREMENT AND THE COLOUR OF DASTAR

Among the characteristics of the Dastar is the colour. Although the religion does not limit specific colours for the dastar, certain colours chosen by the Sikhs are white, dark blue and orange. The three (3) colours were selected for its symbolic meanings. The colour white is used to enhance the aura and acts as a protective shield. It is a colour commonly worn in funerals and is obligatory for a majority of the followers. The colour blue symbolises heroism and is normally worn by aristocrats, ministers and Sikh religious leaders who lead religious rituals called gyanis in India. The colour orange epitomises wisdom and is normally adorned by Sikh followers from all over the world. This colour is commonly worn in religious ceremonies and certain festivals (<http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/WhyTurbans#SikhIdentity>). Apart from the three (3) colours, the colour pink or red is an alternative, commonly worn in special occasions like weddings and engagement ceremonies. This also applies to black that depicts their sadness over past deaths of Sikh followers during the oppressive British colonisation period in India (al-Alusi, 2001).

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE AMRIT SANSKAR CAREMONY

Like the selection of colours, the measurement of the Dastar cloth is not defined by any rules. The common measurement would be five (5) to six (6) metres, depending on the individual's own needs, which varies (Darshan, 2009).

A discussion on the history of amrit sanskar is incomplete without its association with the history of the founding of Khalsa, the holy group in the Sikh religion (Teja, n.d). Based on historical records of the religious development of Sikh, from year 1502-1708, Khalsa was

officially introduced during the leadership of the final Sikh master, Guru Gobind Singh, to establish kinship and solidarity through the amrit sanskar ceremony (Sarjit, 2008). According to Buck (1977), the purpose of amrit sanskar at the time was to evoke heroism and courage amongst the Sikh followers in facing their enemies and to train them to sacrifice themselves in defence of religion. At the time, their targeted enemy was the Moghul Empire who oppressed the Sikhs after the Moghul empire imposed a death sentence on Guru Arjun (May 30th, 1606) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (November 11th, 1675) (Anon, 1993).

Based on Banerjee's writings (1983), the amrit sanskar ceremony was held at a place called Keshgarh on Mac 29, 1699. At the gathering, Guru Gobind Singh began the ceremony by seeking five (5) individuals to prove their loyalty to Sikhism. From among the followers, the five (5) selected were Daya Ram, Dharam Das, Himmat Rai, Mohkan Chand and Sahib Chand (Bailey, 1992). Guru Gobind Singh then mixed the water with honey in a metal pot to make amrit (Burke, 2004), stirring the liquid with a double-edge sword (Mansukhani, 1982). Then the five (5) individuals drank five (5) dips of amrit and the liquid would then be sprinkled to their hair and eyes for five (5) times (Noss, 1980). The honey stirred into the water is a symbol of love and affection that Guru Gobind Singh wanted to instil in his followers (Fields, 1976). According to Banerjee (1962), drinking amrit (honey) is a prerequisite for a Sikh's acceptance into Khalsa.

Having given them the drink, Guru Gobind Singh would ask the five (5) individuals to say "Wahguru ji ka Khalsa, Wahguru ji ki fateh", which means "Khalsa is owned by Wahguru, victory is God's". Then they would adorn the five (5) uniforms; Kesh (hair), Kangha (comb), Kirpan (sword), Kachera (pants) and Kara (metal bracelet) (Jain, 1985). Wearing the 5ks is an important requirement for a Sikh in responding to Guru Gobind Singh's challenge. It is a testament to their faith as a true Sikh (Sarjit, 2008). They are also prohibited from smoking, consuming alcohol and eating meat slaughtered the Islamic way (Burke, 2004). Due to their own will to accept these challenges without rebelling, they become known as 'Panj Piyare', which means 'the five (5) beloved persons' (Banerjee, 1983).

After the amrit sanskar was complete, Guru Gobind Singh allowed the five (5) Panj Piyare to conduct the same rituals on others until it was complete. There are two (2) varying views on this matter. According to Jain (1985), 80,000 Sikh followers completed the amrit ceremony in a few days. Because the Panj Piyare came from different parts in India and there were representatives from every division, the ceremony could be done quickly. However, according to Bailey (1992) all 80,000 Sikh people came to Keshgarh where Guru Gobind Singh conducted amrit (honey) on them by himself.

Based on the history of the amrit sanskar ritual, it is evident that the approach, adopted by Guru Gobind Singh, has formed an integral part of their unique identity. The practice of amrit sanskar created solidarity amongst the Khalsa who are committed to the Sikh teachings. This commitment is evident through the wearing of Panch Kekaar and dastar as an official uniform of the Sikh followers. It is a concept that distinguishes them apart from other religions and followers in other parts of the world.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH DASTAR AND AMRIT SANSKAR

As previously explained, the Khalsa bond was established by Guru Gobind Singh through the

amrit sanskar ceremony. Any Sikhs who refuse to go through the ceremony is not regarded as Khalsa members and their positions are unequal to other Sikhs who applied for amrit to become Khalsa members. In general, the practice of amrit sanskar in the Sikh community today can be divided into three (3) categories. The first category, the Amrit-dhari, refers to Sikhs who have requested for amrit and have become Khalsa members. Their lives are guided by the authentic teachings of Sikhism where they must abide by the rules of Khalsa. The second category, the Kesh-dhari, denotes Sikhs who are the 'in-betweeners'. They wear the dastar and keeps a beard but they are not ready to apply for amrit. The third category is the Sahij-dhari, or the public, who represents those who do not wear the dastar and are not ready to apply for amrit. However, all three groups still frequently visit the gurdwara (Sarjit, 2005).

This means that the first category and the second category, the amrit-dhari and kesh-dhari, are groups of individuals who wear the dastar. What distinguishes them apart is their readiness to apply for amrit to become Khalsa members. In addition, the amrit-dhari group who has become members of Khalsa must adorn all five (5) symbols, or the Panch Kekaar, and they are bound by certain codes of conduct and ethics called the Sikh Rehat Maryada. The codes include prohibition from cutting bodily hairs, committing adultery, smoking, consuming alcohol (Md Zain, 2011) and forbidden from eating halal produce (Burke, 2004). If they go against this code, they will be considered removed from Sikhism and will be labelled 'patit' or traitors. To return as a Khalsa member, they need to undergo amrit sanskar for the second time.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, there are two (2) aspects to the wearing of dastar in the Sikh community. The first is that not all Sikh followers wear dastar. Some may have originated from Sahij-dhari who are not quite ready to undergo amrit sanskar. This group are therefore not bound by the prohibitions imposed to the amrit-dhari group. This is why it is not suprising that a few of the non-wearing Dastar cut their hair, smoke and drink alcohol despite bearing the surname 'Singh'. The second aspect is that wearing the dastar is linked closely with the amrit sanskar practice, an official initiating ceremony for a Sikh to become true members of the Khalsa. Upon membership, they must take into consideration a few things, which is wearing the Panch Kekaar, or the five (5) symbols. Amongst these five (5), Kesh (hair) is a priority because it is a gift from god. This is where dastar plays an important role as it protects the Kesh, regarded by the Sikh followers as a practice to facilitate them into becoming loyal to their master's instructions and the Holy Book of Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

With the information presented in this article, it is hoped to promote understanding and tolerance within the pluralistic society in Malaysia, especially with regards to the teachings of a minority religion like the Sikh religion. It is with an optimistic hope that all religions and races are able to instill positive values by creating a harmonious relationship amongst the majority and minority community in Malaysia.

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