**The aura of chips: material engagements and the production of everyday religious difference in British Asian street kitchens**

**Abstract**

Religious difference is a significant index of social plurality in contemporary Britain. State discourses frequently project society as multifaith, whilst simultaneously signalling religious others as a potential threat to social cohesion. Acknowledging the social power of these constrasting projections, this article analyses religious difference as an everyday feature of British urban pluralism. The paper draws on Stuart Hall’s recognition of processes of diasporic identification, shaped in the context of the pathologizing of racial identity as a fixed form of difference. It argues that an emphasis on identification, rather than identity, invokes a critique of agential approaches to everyday religious practices. Tim Ingold’s proposition of material engagements as a ‘dance of animacy’ provides an analytical tool to explore the production of religious difference beyond agency in this way. The paper focuses on sensory engagements and diaspora food cultures in Sikh and Muslim street kitchen initiatives to explore these themes.

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Keywords: Religious difference; British Muslim; British Sikh; Everyday religion; Affect

**INTRODUCTION**

As the night chill descends on a busy city center street in Birmingham, UK, a diverse group of about 60 or 70 people wait in a rough line, chatting and laughing. Nearby, a scattered group of ten or so Sikh men and women are also waiting – many of them propped against smart cars illegally parked on the wide sidewalk. A battered white van swings round the corner, the heavy sounds of bass emanating from its core. Parking up on the sidewalk, a young Sikh man jumps from the driver’s seat and commences to set up tables in a pre-arranged pattern, helped by his fellow Sikhs. Within about 10 minutes the tables form a site for food service, and the now elongated queue of people file through, taking portions of chips and baked beans as they are served from large pots unloaded from the van. In the background, the sound of Punjabi devotional music fills out the space (with, in this context, mercifully attenuated bass notes), and several of the volunteers chant the name of god as they serve the chips and other food (fieldnotes 15/2/17). A similar scene occurs every evening of the week at the same spot in the city center. The menu may change, and at the weekends a different Sikh organization takes charge of the space, but the same patterns of activity, sounds and smells regularly transform the feeling of this space, every evening without fail.

This is a street kitchen, serving hot food to homeless and marginalized, vulnerable people. Such scenes have become an increasingly regular feature of urban life in Britain since the financial crash of 2008-9, which precipitated austerity measures including the contraction of the welfare state. Religious groups have been prominent in establishing and running foodbanks and street kitchens in response to this crisis (Lambie-Mumford 2013). Overwhelmingly, these groups have been associated with various Christian organisations, but some non-Christian initiatives have also emerged. The focus of this article is on these non-Christian initiatives. It explores street kitchens run by Sikh and Muslim groups in the two British cities of Birmingham and Bradford, analyzing their significance as sites of religious identification in the context of these multi-ethnic and multi-religious cities.

The work of these Sikh and Muslim initiatives may be viewed as examples of Britain’s ‘multifaith society’ at work. Indeed, they are frequently drawn into such discursive frames, valorized through local awards for community service, and in one case by the painting of an enormous mural on a city center building, in which a founding figure of the movement is represented alongside a quotation: ‘People helping people is something which spans every culture and every tradition’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Such representations help to settle religious difference as a positive feature of British cultural life, apparently resolving a political problem that can otherwise manifest itself in ruptures that reveal the uneasy presence of religious otherness as a subversive and dangerous other. These divergent articulations of religious difference signal the operation of a powerful discursive dynamic that has strongly influenced public understandings of religion as a form of social identification in the UK. In this article, I seek both to recognize and move beyond this discursive dynamic, exploring the public manifestation of religious difference in these societies in new ways. Recent sociological work has emphasized the need to explore social interaction beyond the realm of discourse. Drawing on neurological research, Summers-Effler et al argue that ‘we should attend to emotional and perceptual dynamics – extra-deliberative processes that are important yet seldom studied’ (2015: 452). In addition, some recent work on religion has explored ‘animal’ pressures and interventions, providing an affective dimension to our understandings of how religiosity is fashioned in social processes that involve multiple and complex bodily actions and responses (Schaefer 2015; see also O’Neill 2013). How does a consideration of such factors shift understandings of the manifestation, negotiation and development of religious difference in the contemporary context? In this article, I will address this question by focusing on affective and material themes in relation to Sikh and Muslim street kitchens. Street kitchens constitute an apposite site in which to explore these themes, as they are centrally focused around the issue of food and the needs of the body. Highmore (2008) argues that sensorial engagements around food often occur beyond and/or in conjunction with discursive articulations, shaping our approach to the world. The objective is to explore these interwoven factors as they shape the enactment and experience of religious difference as a feature of contemporary urban culture. Before turning to analysis of data drawn from these street kitchens, I will first consider some of the theoretical issues thrown up by an exploration of religious difference both within and beyond discursive frameworks, and subsequently in relation to the issue of food poverty in contemporary Britain.

**REPRESENTING RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE**

There is a sequence in John Akomfrah’s film about the Cultural Studies scholar and public intellectual Stuart Hall where Hall focuses on critical developments in the representation and enactment of racial difference in Britain in the early 1970s (Akomfrah 2013). Hall identifies this period as a moment of realization, when the racial difference of Britain’s post-war migrant population is recognized as ‘here to stay’. What Hall refers to as ‘the dream, the illusion’ of assimilation was ‘buried on both sides’. A mark of this change was the increasingly rigid representation of Black communities in media contexts as a threatening other, through the emergence of resonant tropes such as ‘mugging’. Akomfrah overlays this commentary with some striking images of Black Britons from the period, gazing defiantly into the camera, or situated in scenes of living life on their own terms. On the one hand, then, blackness develops in media and state discourses into a fixed identity, a kind of entrenched anti-social pathology, while on the other we see dynamic processes of diasporic identification, the enactment of new forms of assertive Black difference in everyday life. James Clifford characterized these diasporic dynamics as the ongoing development of ‘forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside with a difference‘ (1994: 308). Born partly out of defiant and creative negotiations of that anti-social pathology, these unfolding, unpredictable identifications were later characterised by Hall as ‘new ethnicities’ (1996). Hall described new ethnicities as in fluid terms, as ‘positional, conditional and conjunctural’, and ‘a process of diaspora-ization…predicated on difference and diversity’ (1996: 447). New ethnicities are ‘defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference’ (Hall 1999: 235). The idea of ‘living with and through’ difference, then, reiterates fluidity, the *process* of identification, as key to the production of forms of community consciousness in diasporic contexts. In the film, Hall contrasts this with the composition of fixed identities in state and media discourses.

I introduce this here as the argument I want to make proposes a similar process related to religious difference in current contexts. That is, a process of discursive pathologising, accompanied by a turn towards processes of religious identification by diaspora communities ‘living with and through difference’ in unpredictable, creative ways. The time lag that is implied here is not a result of religion developing ‘more slowly’ as a form of identity than the racial and ethnic identities that Hall was concerned with. Rather, it is a result of the very processes of identification that he was referring to, in the sense that religion has in the past twenty years or so developed a new significance in Britain as a means of marking ethnic difference and diaspora consciousness (\*\*\*\*\*). Partly, this is precisely the result of new forms of social pathology associated with ethnic difference that settle on the idea of religion. Just like racial difference in the ’70s, religious difference in the current era is frequently represented as a form of profound outsideness, antithetical to dominant liberal secularism. This powerful discourse – which might be characterized as a discourse of militant extremism – frequently shapes contemporary representations of religious difference, particularly when aligned with ethnic difference, and even more specifically, Muslim-ness. This is a well-recognized and much commented on trope (see, for example, Ahmed and Mathes 2017; Poole, Featherstone and Holohan 2010). As the Birmingham mural suggests, however, there is another powerful discourse about religion in contemporary culture, situated as a kind of flip side to the militant extremist pathology – which I will identify here as the multifaith discourse. As in the aforementioned mural, the multifaith discourse presents a vision of modulated religious difference, where diversity is underpinned by a set of common values that mark out communities of faith – whatever faith – as valuable social assets (\*\*\*\*\*). The militant extremist and multifaith discourses, then, stand at opposite ends of a kind of discursive spectrum related to the place of religion in contemporary social and political life.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the wake of the *Satanic Verses* controversy, this polarization of representations became increasingly significant in both popular and state understandings of religious difference (Taylor 2002). In the 21st century, the distinction has become firmer, and the significations around the two poles of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ have become more intense. It is a polarity that filters the multiple appearance of religious ideas and acts in public environments, particularly those associated with minority communities, pushing them either towards a religious radicalism incompatible with liberal political culture, or towards the manifestation of harmonious multifaith diversity, represented conversely as a fundamental feature of that same political culture. Shuttling back and forth between these poles, religious difference is caught in a discursive trap, tethered on a spectrum that tends either towards separation or belonging.

Scholars have long recognized that such constrained representations are persistently undermined by the quiet playing out of everyday religion. In an urban context, for example, Robert Orsi points to the way in which the ‘fantasy of the city’ is challenged by ‘the historical experiences of city people…their cultures; the rich array of religious idioms available to them; the social complexity of city neighbourhoods; and the local political, social, familial and religious resources for stability and order’ (Orsi 1999: 11-12). As this suggests, a sociological understanding of everyday religion requires a finely-tuned examination of religion in context, an exploration of the way in which particular ‘cultures and histories provide the materials out of which everyday religiosities and secularities emerge’ (Ammerman 2007: 6; see also Bender 2003). In addition, sociological and anthropological studies of religion have turned to embodiment as a means of conceptualizing religion beyond discourse. How can a discursive approach, Manuel Vasquez asks us, encompass the meaningfulness of *rasa*, ‘the emotional flavor of dance or theatrical performances through which first-generation Hindu immigrants inculcate Hindu identity and culture to their children’? (Vasquez 2010: 2). Religion, Vasquez argues, is ‘strongly embodied’, so in order to understand and analyse it we need to take seriously the forms of experience the body engages in religiously (see also Dillon 2010, McGuire 2007).

In part, this article is a contribution to this exploration of everyday religion beyond dominant discursive frames. But the particular focus here is on religious difference, and the ways in which this is enacted in everyday contexts of diaspora. As suggested by the reference to Hall’s work, there is a conjunction and interweaving with the history of ethnic difference which is critical to the way in which we understand the enactment of religious difference. As with black identity and Hall’s new ethnicities, the paper proposes that religious difference is developing new and creative trajectories partly out of a negotiation of discursive pathologies.[[3]](#footnote-3) Consequently, we need to keep these pathologies in sight whilst exploring new forms of identification. Food poverty and the response to it provides us with a context within which to explore these themes.

**FOOD POVERTY AND RELIGION**

In cities around the UK during the present era, food has become a deeply political issue, as well as a persistent problem for people trying to subsist in difficult economic times. In 2013 an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on hunger and food poverty was established, and in 2014 this group launched an inquiry into the rise in food poverty in the UK. Street kitchens and food banks have played an increasingly prominent role in addressing this situation, and the high profile of organizations like the Trussell Trust emphasise the prominence of religious groups in providing this support (Lambie-Mumford 2013; Forsey 2016: 18-20).

These groups are there, of course, primarily because religious groups have a long history of supporting marginal elements in society; this has been a fundamental element of religious culture in Britain at least since the industrial revolution (Prochaska 2008). In the current era religious groups have nevertheless been identified as having a particular kind of political and moral resonance, related to the development of secular culture (Bretherton 2010, Habermas 2006). The phenomenon of ‘postsecularism’ is a multiply comprehended and patchily appreciated idea (Beckford 2012), but one way it has been used is to capture the sense of a public resurgence of religion alongside and in dialogue with secularism in western societies. In this context, Habermas identifies religious traditions as having ‘a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life’ (2006: 10; see also Dillon 2010: 143 - 144).

We can see this in the operation of the APPG. The Inquiry report, for example, includes an introduction by its Co-Chair, the Bishop of Truro, Tim Thornton, in which he demonstrates that ‘special power’ to reflect on the broader moral dimensions of food poverty. ‘It is time’, he says, ‘to look again at the state of our country and to review the fundamental values that led to the creation of our welfare state’ (APPGI 2014: 5). The rise in the use of food banks, he continues, indicates

…a deeper problem in our society; the ‘glue’ that used to be there is no longer there in many instances. It can be described as the commodification process with people seen as commodities, and the transactions between them are regarded simply as the exchanging of products rather than relationships between two human beings.

Relationships and social interactions constitute ‘fundamental values’, undermined by a transactional economy in which the people involved are little more than ‘commodities’. The Bishop identifies a threat of dissolution, a lack of glue to hold us together – his frame of reference is social cohesion, a trope that has deeply influenced social policy in the UK since around the turn of the century. Social cohesion is aligned against the threat of segregated communities, perceived as undermining the social fabric of neoliberal societies like contemporary Britain. Adam Dinham (2012) and others have argued that it is in this context that ‘faith’ has developed as a significant political discourse (see also Smith 2004) – it emerges as a form of glue, as it were, a tool of social cohesion in a multicultural society. A neat discursive echo is apparent: the subversive radicalism of militant extremism is easily aligned to the production of segregated communities, whilst the multifaith society is all about the engaged relationships that enable social cohesion. The disproportionate role of religious organizations in the provision of foodbanks and street kitchens reiterates this. It demonstrates how ‘faith’ can help to hold us together, by showing the inherent value of human interaction, as against the impersonal process of economic transaction.

The problem with glue, however, is that it fixes finite things – it bonds discrete subjects, bringing them together in a defined relationship. The metaphor aptly reflects the predictable logics of the multifaith discourse, through which fixed communities of faith interact on the basis of what Ash Amin identifies as the ‘security of strong ties forged in defined communities’ (2012: 14). The expression of this idea in the APPG report reiterates the power of this discursive framing. It reinforces the critical political position of communities – religious or otherwise – as stable human units that are required to demonstrate interaction in order to validate their role as progressive social agents in a context of pluralism. Courtney Bender reminds us, however, that communities are constituted of ‘living, breathing people who have some kind of agency to create their worlds and who embody various actions and use them in different ways to communicate and get things done’ (2003: 6). In other words, people think and act for themselves, and they embody their identities in their actions and ways of being. Bender expresses a core message of the ‘everyday religion’ literature: that religious identities are embodied in people with agency, and they consequently play out differently on the ground to the way in which they are conceptualised in dominant discursive understandings of what constitutes religion (see also Ammerman 2007).

Two related issues emerge from these observations in the current context. First, as with Hall’s description of racial identification in the ‘70s, I argue that the process of minority religious identification develops partly through creative responses to the pathologizing of difference as fixed forms of identity. This re-situates discourse as significant in the process of identification, even whilst recognising, with Hall, that this process is antithetical to the representation of identity as fixed. Secondly, Bender’s focus on agency and embodiment in relation to everyday religion appears to locate the religious in the site of the self – albeit an energetic, interactive self. Just at the moment at which we are escaping the fixed positions of dominant discourse, then, the emphasis on agency and embodiment suggests another form of ‘fixing’, in the sense that religiosity is re-located in the self. Again, this presents a problem for thinking about the dynamic processes of identification that Hall associates with ‘new ethnicities’, and which here are implicated in the production of religious difference. In order to explore this process and this problem further, we need to engage with theory that approaches difference differently.

**THINKING RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE THROUGH THE DANCE OF ANIMACY**

The conceptualization of social engagement as a modulated series of interactions between fixed and firmly defined subject positions is critiqued by the anthropologist Tim Ingold as part of a broader, on-going study of social life and cultural production.[[4]](#footnote-4) Unlike Bender, for Ingold both agency and embodiment are concepts which reinforce this discursive tendency, because they represent subjects (or indeed objects) as ‘turning in on themselves’, driven by an internal force (agency) that ultimately defies analysis (2013: 96-7). Focusing rather on animacy, he argues, opens up the surface of subjects (and objects) to the ‘forces and flows of materials’ that constitute the world:

as a bundle of potentials in an ever-unfolding field of forces and energies, the body moves and is moved not because it is driven by some internal agency, wrapped up in the package, but because as fast as it is gathering or winding itself up, it is forever unravelling or unwinding, alternately breathing in and out. (ibid: 96).

This continuous animacy of the body is predicated on openness to engagement, the ‘interchange of materials across the surfaces by which they differentiate themselves from the surrounding medium’ (95). The interweaving of bodies and things is to Ingold captured by the notion of correspondence, which, critically, he contrasts with interaction. Interaction, he says, correlates with what he calls the dance of agency – where subjects ‘appear to be locked in a contest in which views are no longer shared but batted back and forth’ (2013: 106). In contrast, he argues, correspondence invokes the idea of positions moving in relation to each other, and in relation to other influences, in a fluid engagement. This is the dance of animacy, a ‘tumult of unfolding activity’, ‘neither here nor there but in-between’ (Ingold 2013: 94, 107).

These points are significant for the current argument about the ways in which religious difference is produced. First, the fluidity of the dance of animacy provides us with a challenging lens through which to view the everyday enactment of religious difference both beyond and through engagement with the powerful discursive frames outlined above. Secondly, a critical element of this approach is the movement beyond point-to-point interactions. The dance of animacy is fully alive to the environments, materials and substances that contribute to sociality and cultural production (including that which constitutes religious difference). In this context, the Bishop’s lament at the reduction of human relations to an economy of transactions perhaps needs to be reconsidered. As Ash Amin argues

The material of dwelling in different transactional spaces cannot remain outside explanations of social identity and affiliation. It forms the habits of negotiation of the familiar and the strange, the inside and the outside, the private and the collective. Care for the world and social positioning emerge out of these habits of inhabitation that blend perception and performance, intent and experience, and affective ties with many persons and non-humans. (2012: 24)

Here, an engagement with the material – with transactions, affective ties and the non-human – is understood as critical to an understanding of how social positionings emerge. In effect, these ideas take us beyond both the realm of discourse and the realm of embodied agency, pointing us in the direction of affect theory.

Donovan Schaefer is a Religious Studies scholar whose work is predicated on the significance of affect. He argues for what he calls ‘an animal turn past the grid of signification’, a perspective that ‘sees bodies moving through worlds under the pressure of a complex welter of affects, with language weaving between and reshaping those pressures only sometimes – and even then only haltingly and unevenly’ (2015: 7, 9). The implication here is that an affective approach does not disown the power of discourse so much as recognize the complex ways in which it is imbricated with a matrix of forces that propel bodies to act. Even ideology, Schaefer argues, following Masumi, is predicated on ‘prediscursive compulsions circulating heavily within bodies’ (27), a point he goes on to reinforce through an affective analysis of post-9/11 Islamophobia in the US. The engagement between affect theory and Religious Studies, then, is about recognizing religion as a circuit of power dictated by ‘an affective alchemy of bodies, objects and histories’ (Schaefer 2015: 116).

**RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD**

Street kitchens provide us with a significant analytical locus for thinking about this affective alchemy. The kitchens from which data is drawn for this paper were studied as part of a broader research project exploring the increasing prominence of religiously-inflected social action initiatives since the financial crash of 2008-9 in contexts of ethnic and religious diversity in Britain (\*\*\*\*\*). This broader project gathered data from fourteen organizations related to a range of religious traditions in the multi-religious cities of Bradford and Birmingham, first in 2013-14 (Bradford), and then in 2017 (Birmingham and Bradford). The current paper focuses on four of these organizations – all of them primarily street kitchens. Two are identifiably Muslim and based in Bradford; two are identifiably Sikh and based in Birmingham. All four are small, relatively informal, loosely constituted organizations driven by the dedication of a few central individuals, well supported by relatively transient groups of volunteers, most (but not all) of whom share the same religious identity as the central individuals. The thematic focus of this paper on the issue of food and the way in which it is related to religious difference in these urban environments was the key driver of my decision to focus on the four organizations. As we shall see, there is a strong sense of religiosity expressed through food culture in South Asian Muslim and Sikh traditions. The research demonstrates how this food-related religiosity is creatively enacted in British cities where these traditions now have a significant cultural presence (see also \*\*\*\*\*; McLoughlin, Gould, Kabir & Tomalin 2014). The dataset on which the article draws is ethnographic. 141 pages of field notes were generated, using a comprehensive notetaking method, through working as a volunteer in these street kitchens on a regular basis – normally weekly – over a period of at least three months in each case. Participating in this way was particularly important, given the objective in this paper to explore religious difference through what Summers-Effler et al identify as ‘extra-deliberative aspects of social organization’ (2015: 455) – the rhythms of movement, the play of smells, sounds, and tastes that marked the spaces in distinctive but slowly emerging ways. Reference is made to specific fieldnote data in the text in relation to these aspects, complimented by generic ‘indicative narrative’ reflections (Shannahan 2011: 238) drawn from participant observation in the various street kitchens. This data is supplemented by 10 semi-structured interviews, each of approximately 30 minutes, with volunteers and central individuals involved in these initiatives. My research does not include formal interviews with service users, although data drawn from interactions in the course of participant observation are included – particularly those interactions that focus on emotional dynamics and sensory processes (Summers-Effler et al 2015). The focus on sensory engagement emerged from open coding of the data, leading to identification of a core code on this theme, and selective coding related to the five senses, with the particular themes of sound, smell and taste emerging as significant forms of sensorial engagement. All organizations and individuals are anonymised in this article. Pseudonyms are used where appropriate.

**FOOD AURAS, STREET KITCHENS AND ‘DIASPORIC ANIMACY’**

In a straightforward way, street kitchens exist due to a recognition of the animal need for nourishment. But this need is bound up with a complex set of sensations and discursively-charged cultural positions: desires prompted by scent, colour, texture and sounds; historically-grounded boundaries between appeal and disgust, safety and danger; habits of consumption and commensality; and moralities of frugality and excess, propriety and greed. In all of these inter-related fields, we can see the interweaving of language and concepts with a variety of prediscursive sensations. In this and the following section I aim to show how this interweaving constitutes a complex dance of animacy through which religious difference is asserted and negotiated as a feature of urban life.

South Asian religious traditions provide fertile resources for thinking about a layered understanding of sensations and concepts associated with food. Although much of the literature focuses on the social prohibitions that are marked in one way or another by food restrictions,[[5]](#footnote-5) there is also a marked tradition of attributing special qualities to food associated with proximity to the divine and/or the performance of selfless devotional acts. Anna King, for example, explores food practices in the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). She explains how *prasadam*, food left over from offerings to the divine force, is subsequently distributed to people both within and beyond the congregation, reflecting broader Hindu traditions. Because of the particular journey of the food across the presence of the divine, King comments, there is a divine quality to this food which is then transmitted to those who consume it. The consumers, she reports, ‘gradually transform day by day into pure Vaishnavas’ (2012: 444).

In Sikh traditions, food is also vitally important. In particular, the centrality of food is indicated by the institution of *langar –* a cultural institution of North-West India in particular which for several centuries has been inextricably linked to Sikh identity. *Langar* is a meal cooked by devotees in the kitchen of a gurudwara, utilizing produce given freely by the congregation, served in a spirit of convivial togetherness to all without distinction, in proximity to the Guru. This non-discriminatory sharing is known as *pangat*.[[6]](#footnote-6) The whole process is an enactment of *seva*, or devotional service, which Ann Murphy identifies as ‘a constitutive aspect of Sikh subjectivity in diaspora’ (2004, 362). In addition, the preparation of food at *langar* is marked by ritual processes of blessing and the chanting of the name of god, which invest it with a quality described by an interlocutor of Desjardins and Desjardins as ‘God-intoxicated’ (2009). One Sikh in Birmingham explained to me that there is an ‘aura’ around the conditions of *langar*, which is transmitted to the food and so to the consumer, enhancing their capacity to adopt new ways of being, enabling them to inculcate ‘good human values’, pitched as a valuable social asset in the context of the multicultural city.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Although *langar* is often strongly associated with Sikh traditions, it has a broader cultural resonance which sees these notions of divine proximity, devotional labour and egalitarian sharing articulated across traditions extant in South Asia. Pnina Werbner’s ethnographic account of *langar* at a Sufi lodge in Kohat district, Pakistan demonstrates the way in which the framework of *langar* produces a similar kind of attribution of power to food in an Islamic context. *Langar* food has ‘healing powers’, it is pure, she was told, ‘because it is cooked by men of pure heart who chant *zikr* as they cook’ (2003: 112, 111). Here again, then, the role of what the Sikh interlocutor described as an ‘aura’ is key to an understanding of food preparation and consumption as a transactional space. In the Sikh example, the aura operates to transmit the power of devotional action and divine proximity between substances and beings, enabling personal development along a path of humanity. Werbner argues that the frameworks of giving and labouring in the context of the Sufi lodge, described by the Shaikh of Ghamkol Sharif in Kohat as ‘the house of Allah’ (2003: 114), constitute a similar kind of transactional conversion: ‘from the cash economy to the moral economy’ (111). Werbner argues that transactions involving labour and giving in the context of South Asian religious traditions are frequently represented as a form of self-interest, but that the ‘conversion’ she identifies in the context of the Sufi lodge is representative of ‘the central experience of altruism and humanism which energises Sufism’ (2003: 103). Central to this conversion is the transaction of sacred power not just between humans, but also between a range of subjects, objects and substances. She gives the example of the central organizer of the annual *‘urs* festival at Ghamkol Sharif, who nourishes his fields each year by sprinkling them with the water he uses to wash the clothes he has worn throughout the period he has been engaged in the devotional labour of organizing the festival. This, Werbner, argues, is a ‘sacred exchange across boundaries’ which decenters the human in the architecture of morality (2003: 127). Being attentive to the dance of animacy enables us to understand this approach. Transaction in this context denotes the engagement of humans in multiple exchanges, ‘an ever-unfolding field of forces and energies’ which involve substances, materials and environments. Similarly, the aura of *langar* food in Birmingham is generated by the interwoven correspondence of the air of the gurudwara, the practices of food preparation, the food stuffs themselves, and the convivial environments in which it is consumed. It is in this context that the food has the capacity to ‘transmit good human values’.

The institution of *langar* is fundamental to the operation of the two Sikh street kitchens in Birmingham that I attended as a volunteer. A distinctive feature of these kitchens was their inexorable regularity. Between these two low-level, loose organizations, the same spot on the busy street corner with which we began is animated by food service at the same time on every single evening of the year (one organization covers the week days, the other covers the weekends). Reminiscent of Werbner’s Sufi lodge, which she argues is marked out by its commitment to ‘perpetual sacrifice’ (2003: 111), the striking consistency of the Birmingham operation relies first and foremost on the daily rhythms of *langar,* as baseline hot food is drawn from this cultural and physical resource. Food is cooked in the kitchens of various gurudwaras in the area, and transported to the city center site in an ancient van. This is not ‘leftover’ food from the gurudwara’s general production. It is food cooked fresh and specifically for the street kitchen. In my experience, the cooking is undertaken either by families (especially on the weekend) or by two or three individuals who work closely together to produce the meal. It is hard work, devotional labour in the *Guru ka langar*, the Guru’s kitchen, sometimes embellished by the chanting of the name of god as the vegetables are chopped and the pots stirred (fieldnotes 4/3/17), similar again to Werbner’s observations about *zikr* at the sufi *langar*.

The lacing of the *langar* into the operation of street kitchens is indicative of a negotiation of new ways of being Sikh in Birmingham, a form of identification which occurs in the correspondence of a range of factors and substances. The food prepared for the street kitchen is often the standard *langar* fare of vegetable curry, dal, and rice. Just as frequently, however, it is pasta and vegetarian sauce. A significant feature is that at other times the food is *not* prepared in *Guru ka langar.* The chips referred to in the title of this article, for example, are regularly donated by a local chip shop. Chips are a staple part of working class diets in the UK: thick fingers of potato, deep fried in oil and frequently but by no means exclusively served with deep fried fish. Chip shops, or ‘chippies’, speak UK culture. Their ubiquity across the country belies the manifold variations that reflect diversity. On the Leeds Road in Bradford, chips are served with Lahori fish or *masala* chicken. They are knotted into the South Asian-dominated cultures of this locality. At the street kitchen in Birmingham, they are served most frequently with baked beans, another UK cultural staple, because the Sikh organization will only serve vegetarian food, in line with its religious identity. This, then, indicates a kind of inflection towards *langar*, even when the food is not cooked at one of the many gurudwaras that offer their kitchens to the street kitchen initiative, nor is representative of the food culture associated with these spaces. There is a quality associated with the *langar* that is transmitted to all food served at the street kitchen, in the sense that this space is, as explained to me by many *sevadars* (volunteers), a *langar* by extension. People don’t realise they can go into any Gurudwara to get food, one *sevadar* tells me, so we need to bring the *langar* to them (fieldnotes 15/2/17). The status of the food is reinforced by saying prayers and touching the ground at the beginning of each service, by the fact that servers at the kitchen cover their hair as in the gurudwara, whether they are Sikh or not, and by other factors that mark out the space as different, which we will go on to explore presently.

It is in this sense, then, that I argue that the chips served in this street kitchen have an ‘aura’. Even though the chips have not been prepared or consumed in the context of a conventional *langar*, they are interwoven with practices and approaches that echo this institution, suggesting Werbner’s ‘sacred exchange’ across the boundaries that may be seen to exist between, for example, a Gurudwara and a chip shop, or between vegetarian food prepared in the rarefied air of the *langar*, and potatoes fried in the bustle of early evening production that services the local population with deep-fried fish, chicken, chips and pickled eggs. The aura of chips is, then, a ‘loose aura’, an opening out of the practices of the *langar,* and, by extension, ways of being Sikh, in correspondence with local cultural forms, producing this fleeting moment of religious difference on the street.

And it is very much a fleeting moment. Stand on the street corner at 6 pm and it is just like any other busy street corner in the center of a big city. Stand on it at 7pm and it is a hive of distinctive activity and sensations, as the food is served and consumed. By 8pm the street corner resumes its regular quality – a space for walking, for getting somewhere else. Werbner sees a dynamic in what she terms diaspora public space, whereby ‘hidden networks of kin, friends and work or business partners’ move through a process of ideological convergence into a situation of more generally public mobilization (2002: 66-7). Although speaking primarily about political movements, Werbner’s point reflects a generic process which is also evident in the day to day operation of the diasporic street kitchen. The kitchen manifests on the street corner through the coming together of a resilient web of diasporic associations which work with and through embedded knowledge and understanding of local economies and multiple social networks, layers of cultural resonance, and devotional norms that frame labour and giving in particular ways.

These factors constitute what Amin recognizes as ‘habits of inhabitation’ and the ‘material of dwelling in different transactional spaces’ (2012: 24) – but configured particularly by the experience of ethnic and religious difference. Importantly, the manifestation of religious difference in the street kitchen therefore comes not just from the idea of Sikhism, but from elements of the particular experience of being Sikh in Birmingham, of being Asian and brown in Birmingham, *a part of* as well as *apart* *from* the city and its dominant cultures, with all the subtle correspondences – everyday negotiations, confrontations and other engagements – that these layered forms of identification and difference entail. As a feature of this difference, the loose aura of the chips is indicative of the opening out of cultural forms, the creative correspondences which see religious difference enacted in new ways. Similar correspondences were evident in other street kitchens examined as part of this research. Muslim street kitchens in Bradford are sustained via networks of individuals, families and businesses who commit to the provision of supplies and other resources in the spirit of religious service and community sustenance, variously expressed as *zakat, sadaqqa* or *khidmat*. One of these kitchens is run by a local Muslim businessman, ‘Bradford born and bred’, who launched the initiative in response to what he perceived as the inaction of established Muslim institutions in the city, especially mosques. Self-consciously existing outside these established religious frameworks, the street kitchen has nevertheless sought clerical sanction, but in a highly innovative way, by appointing an ‘Ashura Committee’ of three local Imams to provide guidance to the mixed-gender management committee.[[8]](#footnote-8) A similar kind of dynamic social and religious energy is apparent, then, and these energies again contribute to the production of creatively different ways of being Muslim – Muslim identifications – in the context of the street kitchen (\*\*\*\*\*).

Stuart Hall describes diaspora identities as ‘those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’ (Hall 1999: 235). To refer to Ingold again, the street kitchens are brought into being through a ‘tumult of unfolding activity’, a doing of religious difference as animate life that is tied to diasporic experience. This then is a kind of ‘diasporic animacy’, a dynamic dance of devotional ethics, everyday food cultures, complex networks of community association, and creative enactments of religious culture (as represented by the aura of chips) that sit ‘neither here nor there but in-between’ established forms of ‘faith identity’ in order to produce new identifications of religious difference. In the following section I develop this concept of diasporic animacy further through the analysis of data drawn from the street kitchens in more detail. Building on Ingold’s argument that we need to be attentive to action, and to the human as decentred within the ‘forces and flows of material’ that constitute life in the dance of animacy, I focus in particular on sensorial engagements as a critical feature of street kitchen activity.

**SENSES OF DIFFERENCE**

The way in which food preparation in the *Guru ka langar* is sometimes marked by the sound of the chanting of the name of god, or *nam simaran,* has already been noted. This same practice also occurs in the street kitchen. As they hand out food, some volunteers chant repetitively: ‘sat nam waheguru’ (fieldnotes 15/2/17). Although for these particular volunteers it effectively forecloses the possibility of dialogue with the service users, the chanted *simaran* is significant as it provides a distinctive aesthetic quality to the street kitchen, which is enhanced by an accompaniment of recorded *kirtan,* or devotional hymns*,* on the stereo system of the main van in which pots of food are carried to the venue. This recorded *kirtan* provides a continuous backdrop to the serving of food.

Charles Townsend argues that Sikh *kirtan* is a fundamental element of the maintenance of Sikh identity in California. *Kirtan* he says, plays multiple roles:

as *formative of identities*, as a *source of pride* and *sense of uniqueness*, as providing a *sense of connection with a history and ‘homeland’*, as a form of *self-commemoration* for these communities, as *protection of identity* forms that may be imperiled…, and as a potent locus for the *transmission* of religio-cultural identity between members and generations (2011: 212, emphasis in original).

This analysis projects *kirtan* primarily as a kind of symbol of Sikh tradition and community identity in minority context. Although this goes some way towards understanding the functionality of sacred sound of this nature, extending the focus to the sensory presence of such sound, and paying attention to the correspondence of such sounds in a context of diasoporic animacy can help us to analyse it further. Nirinjan Khalsa’s examination of the term *kirtan* emphasizes that although it is ‘commonly referred to as singing’, etymologically it conjoins the act of praise with dyeing processes and the body. Effectively, she argues, *kirtan* is devotional practice which ‘dyes the body in loving praise of the Divine’ through both utterance and listening (2017: 268). As with *nam simaran*, the sound of *kirtan* is meditative, engendering focus on the Divine, and actively transforming both body and mind with a ‘cleansing effect’ (275). In this sense, the meditative repetition of the name of god and the sounds of *kirtan* in the street kitchen both echo and reinforce the transformative ‘aura’ of *langar* food in the street kitchen, enabling the development of ‘good human values’. This is reminiscent of David Garbin’s examination of the sound of Congolese Kimbanguist processions in London. As one processionist comments to Garbin, ‘we have the spirit of God coming through the music. It’s like a direct confrontation and we are spreading God’s vibes really all around where the devil has settled all his negativity’ (2012: 435).

Garbin emphasizes the ‘multivocal’ quality of the Kimbanguist processions, ‘drawing on a plurality of identity repertoires and imaginaries’ (426) in the context of diaspora. As well as ‘spreading God’s vibes’, then, Garbin emphasises that this multivocality is partly about the performance of multicultural urban culture in London (see also David 2012; and, although in the different context of planning politics, Gale 2004). In a similar way, the soundscape of *nam simaran* and *kirtan* provides a more non-specific religious quality to the street kitchen, experienced by users and passers-by as an indication of the cultural identity of the providers of food. The street kitchen takes place in the center of Birmingham, adjacent to a busy shopping district. Religiosity is a regular part of the soundscape of this district, from the exhortations of individual Christian preachers to the music and chanting of groups of ISKCON devotees. *Nam simaran* and *kirtan* melt partly into this multifaith sound. But the connection to the provision of food delivers a distinctive quality to this sound.

A vignette may help to demonstrate this. As a small group of volunteers chants, one man moving down the food line asks another volunteer what they are saying; ‘it is the name of god’, the volunteer replies. The man indicates his approval with a repeated nod, as he moves along the line to receive a cup of *masala* tea and a muffin. Later, I see him joining in with the *simaran*, chanting to himself and moving to the rhythm as he sips his tea (fieldnotes 27/3/17). The sound of *simaran* here corresponds with consumption practices and a gentle search for knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries to develop the ‘loose’ aura of distinctive religious difference in the space, as the sonic culture of the *langar* is woven into everyday practices and bodily movements of non-Sikh individuals in the city. The question of whether the man’s body is ‘dyed in loving praise of the divine’ is of course open, but this is itself a feature of the loose aura of diasporic animacy, and new forms of religious identification. They appear fleetingly, ‘not so much the outward effect of an embodied agency as the propulsion of animate being as it spills out into the world’ (Ingold 2013: 104).

Attending to smell can further develop this point. Ben Highmore indicates that taste and smell are ‘central components for convivial and cosmopolitan intercultural, inter-ethnic exchange’ (2008: 395-6). Acknowledging the relations of power that can underpin such exchanges, Highmore points up the possibility that the sampling of ‘exotic’ foodstuffs can take place ‘under the awning of neo-colonial relations’, a kind of multicultural powerplay. Nevertheless, he argues, there is potential for different relations of power, a ‘bodily enthusiasm’ for sensual culture in ways that may ‘extend the cultural self’ (2008: 390-1). Sikh and Muslim street kitchens can demonstrate both the shifting relations of power and this extending of the self out through a kind of cosmopolitan sensual relish.

The kitchens in Birmingham and Bradford are the providers of food to groups of people who are often desperately marginalized. Volunteering at these kitchens is expressed often both as an opportunity to demonstrate the worth of particular religious values in the context of pejorative discursive representations, and as an opportunity to ‘give something back’ to society from people who feel a sense of their own relative social stability – a stability grounded in second/third generation financial security, but also often strongly related to the resource of religiosity as a moral and social grounding.[[9]](#footnote-9) This contrasts with what can sometimes be perceived as the chaotic instability of service users’ lives. Such perceived differentiations, then, inform an entirely different power dynamic around the provision of food, reinforced by the frequent rules that are established about where to stand, when food will be served, how to access hot drinks and so on. Under such circumstances, ‘sampling the exotic’ may appear more as a form of submission than a re-assertion of colonial relations.

In addition, Bradford and Birmingham are ethnically very diverse urban centers, and this diversity is reflected in those that use street kitchens. As well as Afro-Caribbean and Asian men and women, Eastern European migrants are also frequent users of these kitchens – the sounds of multiple languages fill the air as food is served. For one provider in Bradford this has led to a collaboration with a Polish charity focused on supporting Eastern European migrants, and the integration of Polish speaking volunteers. Many service users try out their Urdu as a sign of appreciation, saying *shukria* instead of thank you as they receive their plates of food. One such ‘shukria interaction’ I witnessed led to an interesting cosmopolitan moment – a Gujarati Muslim volunteer responded by reference to *abhara*, thanks in Gujarati. A conversation thus began about the language differences of the volunteers, as well as the service users, with Romanian and Hungarian versions also referenced. This convivial exchange disrupts the discursive trope of religious extremism that so often casts Muslim Bradford as a homogeneous, unified bloc, situating the multiple cultures of South Asia within a broader global set of diversities (fieldnotes 2/12/13). Such moments are enacted repeatedly through minor interactions over the course of the provision and reception of food and drink. As such, street kitchens in these cities can be cosmopolitan spaces, marked by a strong sense of diversity and a feeling of solidarity around the food and its consumption (\*\*\*\*\*).

This sense is reinforced and even produced sensorially. A Muslim street kitchen that runs in a square in the center of Bradford each week serves biryani prepared by a local caterer. The scent of the aromatic rice and chicken dish drifts across the space that the street kitchen occupies as the volunteers open the lid of the large pot that contains it and begin to prepare takeaway trays for distribution. The smell is a source of frequent comment by service users and volunteers alike, as the moment when service ensues is awaited. It is a sensuous anticipation, soon fulfilled by the coming of the food and the olfactory enjoyment of the spices that lift the flavour of the rice. This is the sensory feeling of the Muslim street kitchen. On the side of the van from which the food is distributed, a quotation from the Prophet marks the space as Muslim: ‘Every act of kindness is charity’. This quotation derives from a Hadith, although here it is ascribed generically to the Prophet. Alongside the presence of numerous veiled woman volunteers and the frequent use of verbal inflections such as ‘inshallah’ and ‘hamdullah’, this statement tethers the space as Muslim. The scent and subsequent taste of the spicy biryani, a source of convivial olfactory satisfaction for most visitors to the kitchen, corresponds with this Muslim-ness. The aroma of spicy food is strongly associated with the open, giving positionality of the predominantly Muslim members of the group, challenging discursive tropes of Muslim segregation with a visceral sense of cosmopolitan conviviality.

As well as spices, spice also has an occasional presence in the arena of the street kitchen. This term refers to a class of synthetic cannabinoid drugs that are smoked, and are readily available and comparatively cheap in large urban centers in Britain. Known to induce a short but intense numbing effect on the brain, most versions of spice are accompanied by a strong pungent smell, which was described to me, as I volunteered at a Muslim street kitchen based in a disused shop in Bradford, as fishy. A small group of people sitting on a wall on the opposite side of the road to the street kitchen were smoking the drug. Many people, crossing the road to come for food, remarked on the smell as I stood outside the kitchen, welcoming people into the temporary venue, where the aroma of spices, rather than spice, was dominant. One man, having told me squarely that he was a long-term alcoholic, spoke disapprovingly of the drug and its impact on people he knew. He returned to the pungent fishy smell repeatedly – it appeared to confirm for him the nefarious quality of the drug (fieldnotes 2/4/17).

Standing there, watching these micro-journeys, I was struck by the significance of this heady transition. Bodies moving from the sensorial field of spice to that of spices. A journey into a religiously-inflected diasporic public space, which meets those travelers atmospherically as the aroma of spices drifts out of the door: ‘the propulsion of animate being as it spills out into the world’. Run by a devoted follower of the Qadri *silsila*, this particular street kitchen is determinedly indoors. The objective is to provide food in a convivial setting, precisely in order to enable people to benefit as human beings from the feeling generated by eating and drinking together in a relaxed atmosphere. As well as the food, then, there is a kind of human nourishment that is imparted by taking part in this street kitchen, another indication of the forms of transmission through which devotional activity is creatively geared towards to the development of ‘good human values’.

The site of this scene has since been abandoned. The street kitchen has moved on to another site, reflecting the fleeting nature of this sector, the ways in which those involved have to respond lightly to change, reacting to a variety of pressures and socio-economic shifts (\*\*\*\*\*). In such contexts of change, it is the familiarity of the smells and tastes of curry and rice which provide a kind of convivial anchor, translating devotional labour into multidimensional nourishment, and helping to locate these forms of Muslim-ness as a fleeting yet concurrently persistent presence, ‘neither here nor there but in-between’ the structures and discourses that normally shape the city.

**CONCLUSION**

Focusing on sound and smell, then, emphasizes an ephemeral quality to these manifestations of religious difference in British cities. Smells and tastes come and go, just as the sites of Muslim street kitchens in Bradford are sometimes required to move on, and the Sikh street kitchen in Birmingham appears and disappears each evening, like a breath of the city. These ephemeralities are indicative of an important analytical principle that emerges from this study: that in order to understand the continuing development of religious difference as a facet of contemporary western societies, we need first to appreciate the fundamental mobility of this difference. It is always on the move, reflecting the inventiveness and creative engagements that inform the enactment of religiosity as a process of identification, rather than a form of identity. Difference unfolds in inconclusive ways, marked by the fluid correspondence of ‘humans, things, symbols, technologies, matter and nature’ (Amin 2012: 66). Recognising this dynamic as the quality of religious difference in the contemporary city infers a methodological challenge, a re-thinking of our ways of looking, because, as I have argued, religious ways of being and identifying in contemporary secular cultures have been marked by forms of agency, whether this agency is marked by dominant discursive formations or everyday ways of living and embodying religion in a religiously-plural society. Agency, as Ingold argues (2013: 97), implies possession; in terms of religious difference, it implies that people ‘have’ religion, they are religious agents, and their agency plays out in their actions, and/or is managed by institutions. Without dismissing the significant social and political power of this understanding of religious difference, this article is an attempt to think differently about difference, to begin with a recognition that significant numbers of people in multicultural contexts ‘do’ religion, and that this constitutes a process of identification. The aim has then been to look for ways to analyze that process in a productive and meaningful manner.

The turn to Ingold’s ‘dance of animacy’ represents a methodological tool designed to achieve this aim. The engagement with food production and consumption in British Asian street kitchens has provided the focus for the deployment of this tool. The street kitchens have proven to be a fertile site for thinking differently, because of the emphasis in Ingold’s model on social engagement as immersed in and part of a broader, dynamic set of correspondences between materials, substances and environments. In arguing for a consideration of materials, rather than materiality, Ingold comments that ‘to describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate’ (2013: 30). This article demonstrates how foodstuffs and their properties flow, mix and mutate in the context of processes of production and consumption; the donated chips, with their aura of the *langar*, are a key example of this sense of story. The examination of environments, sounds and smells has demonstrated how these processes operate as a key transactional space for the articulation and acknowledgement of diverse forms of religiosity. Materials and sensations become a vital factor in understanding how this religiosity is situated as a feature of contemporary multicultural life, alongside and in conjunction with elements of social engagement. The social networks, layered cultural resources and food practices developing in post-migrant communities provide a distinctive quality to this dynamism. This is what I have described as ‘diasporic animacy’, where religious difference is fashioned through correspondence between a range of factors and manifested in food production and consumption.

This particular dance of animacy is diasporic in the first instance because much of it takes place within the social spaces that are defined by flows of materials, practices and ideas associated with post-migrant communities and their cultural forms. More than this, however, the evidence examined here demonstrates that these communities and cultural forms are responding creatively to developing social and political environments in order to produce new forms of practice, new ways of understanding what it means to be religious in context. To return to the ideas of Stuart Hall about the playing out of ethnic difference in contexts of diaspora, he notes the development of ‘a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’ (Hall 1999: 235). This dynamic emerges out of what Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk identify as a ‘multivocality of belongings’ (2005: 29). The particular characteristic that demonstrates these ideas in the context of the street kitchens is ‘looseness’. I have used this term to describe the ways in which properties of sacred power (‘auras’) associated with practices of devotional labour and giving shift subtly in the context of the street kitchen, driven by a complex mesh of correspondences between layered cultural practices, foodstuffs, different places, sounds and smells. Muslim and Sikh compulsions around doing service as a devotional enactment move with the idea of food provision in the city. Logistical technologies, divine invocations and sensorial engagements correspond in fluid ways to produce a kind of ‘loose aura’ that informs the presentation of religious difference as a resource for articulating ‘good human values’ in the city. I argue that this is evidence that the difference associated with Muslim and Sikh religiosities in Britain is opening out in new ways; it may respond to, but it is not bound by the discursive constraints of the extremism-multifaith dichotomy with which we started. As Hall did in relation to ethnicity in the 1970s, we need to recognize this as significant, if we are to realize the possibilities of religiosity as a resonant social and political presence in multicultural societies like Britain.

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1. The citation for this quotation, from a news story, is withheld to preserve the anonymity of the organization. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The discursive polarity is reminiscent of a distinction established by John Dewey (1934). Dewey makes the distinction between the religions and the religious (faith), with the latter pitched as a universalist quality of experience detached from notions of the supernatural. There are resonances with the religion-faith dynamic articulated here, although any genealogical connection is beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These trajectories do in fact include discursive interventions which seek to challenge these pathologies. For an examination of this dimension of minority religious social action, see \*\*\*\*\*\* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an interesting comparable critique of interaction, which then argues for transaction as an alternative, fluid conceptualisation of social process, see Emirbayer 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A useful overview is provided in Roy 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. literally ‘line’ or ‘row’, referring to the seating arrangement in a *langar* hall, where everyone sits together in rows on the floor, expressing a notion of equality and togetherness before the Guru (Kaur 2017: 27 – 28) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with Ajit 27/2/17 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Interview with Sajid, 13/11/13 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Interview with Harsh 4/3/17 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)