

“ . . . deconstructing the myth [of terrorism] in favor of reasonable ethnographic assessment is the first step . . . toward curbing such violence in the future. ”

## TERRORISM, MYTH, AND THE POWER OF ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAXIS

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*“Terrorism,” like “witchcraft,” is a concept that anthropology can aid in deconstructing. The mythos of “the terrorist” has become part of the political drama of our time despite a lack of concreteness in its definition. Drawing on a decade of ethnographic research with Sikh separatist militants, this article focuses on how the imagining of terror has replaced the reality of armed conflict among the Sikhs in Western legal and policy settings. Specific examples of anthropological intervention in this arena illustrate how face-to-face knowledge can contribute to greater accuracy in judicial and legislative decisions regarding terrorism. Given the life-and-death importance of these decisions, anthropologists of conscience are called on to offer the very special grassroots perspective they have as policies are developed nationally and internationally, bringing the concrete realism of ethnography into courtrooms, halls of parliaments, and executive offices around the world.*

The streets surrounding the New York City courthouse were closed off in preparation for the hearing of two young Sikhs colloquially called “Sukhi” and “Kuki.” Sharpshooters lurked on the rooftops of surrounding buildings, and a police bomb squad was prominently visible. Everyone entering the building had purses, briefcases, and bags inspected both upon entry and again at the door to the courtroom itself, and all and sundry had to pass through metal detectors. While the prosecuting attorney went in and out of the courtroom surrounded by U.S. marshals, the defense attorney had to go through the x-ray procedure, present identification, and sign in and out.

When Sukhi and Kuki entered the courtroom, they did so amidst a cordon of security personnel. They appeared in their prison uniforms, shackled hand and foot with a belly chain added to further limit motion of the cuffed hands. The defense attorney protested that the climate of fear that so pervaded the proceedings made a fair hearing for her clients—not accused of any crime in the United States—impossible. Sukhi and Kuki were wanted by the government of India for acts it deemed “terrorist,” although a formal commission of inquiry appointed by the chief minister of Punjab and headed by a retired high court justice had determined that the charges against them were unfounded. Claiming persecution by the government of India, the two young men were seeking asylum in the United States. They were represented by Manhattan attorneys Ronald Kuby and Mary Pike, who had worked closely with the late civil rights lawyer Bill Kunstler.

The hearing of Sukhi and Kuki had a strange denouement. It turned out that the reason for the extraordinary and prejudicial security had been because threats had been received by the prosecuting attorney and the extradition magistrate and indeed continued to be received during the hearing. But, in an odd twist, it emerged that the so-called threats had been sent by the prosecutor herself. She eventually pled guilty to a charge of corrupt endeavor to obstruct the administration of justice but was found not guilty by reason of insanity. She claimed she could not remember writing or sending the threatening letters and related her feelings of anger verging on violence toward her cat, whom she otherwise held dear. The prosecutor was recommended counseling but was not remanded to any custodial facility after the finding of not guilty of obstructing justice by reason of insanity.

The damage, however, had been done. Court personnel as well as the general public had been exposed to an unforgettable image of "terrorists" so dangerous that they required sharpshooting teams and bomb squads at the ready, in a scene straight out of a television crime drama. The case of Sukhi and Kuki in fact dragged on for a long thirteen years further, until their extradition back to India in the spring of 2000. They had spent more than a dozen years imprisoned in New York despite having never been charged with any crime on U.S. soil.

Bill Kunstler, the well-known civil rights attorney who had defended the Black Panthers, the Chicago Seven, AIM activists, and other radicals in his career at the bar, had worked on the Sukhi-Kuki case before his death. In his autobiography, *My Life as a Radical Lawyer* (1994), there is a portrait of Kunstler wearing a Sikh *kara*, or steel bangle, on his wrist. A daring lawyer who believed that everyone was deserving of the fullest protection of the law, Kunstler had also defended the Muslims alleged to have blown up the World Trade Center, despite heavy protest from his own community of Jews. Noting that prejudice and discrimination against Muslims runs rampant in contemporary American society, to the level of contaminating the legal procedures to which all are entitled, Kunstler commented that the Muslims had become "the niggers of our age." There are few to protest when their rights are abridged. Sikhs, though less well known, share this level of popular disregard. They look exotic with their turbans and unshorn beards, they practice a religion few in the West know much about, and when Sukhi and Kuki showed up chained to the max, the rifles of SWAT (Special

Weapons and Tactics) personnel trained on them from all directions, most onlookers assumed their guilt from the start.

I have also personally encountered the creation of a fantasy world in U.S. penal and legal settings in which the "obvious" dangerousness of the Sikhs is brought to the fore. In 1993, when I was just beginning my research on Sikh militancy, I went with two leading members of the Sikh community to talk with Kulbir Singh Barapind, who had just arrived in the United States as an asylum seeker and was in detention in Los Angeles. The Indian government alleged that he had committed a string of murders of police and security personnel, in conjunction with the Sikh movement for the independent state of Khalistan. As an alleged killer, Kulbir was treated with extreme caution by the authorities at the detention center. He was placed in solitary confinement. His turban—key to the dignity of baptized Sikhs—was removed lest he use it as a weapon. After signing an array of forms and ridding ourselves of all jewelry (the metal from which Kulbir or another prisoner might presumably try to use nefariously), we were escorted by armed guards to an exercise yard enclosed by concertina wire and monitored by sentries up in towers. Kulbir was escorted to our presence by a similarly armed guard and stood some distance away from us. A Sikh who was with me reached to touch him but was firmly pulled back by the guard. "No physical contact," the guard ordered firmly.

Kulbir looked terrible. His hair, unturbaned, was flying everywhere, and his eyes were sunken and red rimmed as he squinted into the glaring Los Angeles sunlight. "OK, you can interview him now," the guard told me, his expression grim. I stood there looking from this bedraggled prisoner in his orange jumpsuit, to the guards, to the wire, to the towers, to the three-meter expanse of concrete between us. What kind of conversation would be at all possible under these conditions? In the event, I did not really say much of anything. Kulbir and the other two Sikhs prayed together while I stood by silently, vowing to somehow overcome the crushing presence of assumed danger that inhibited real communication with people like Sikh militants.

Eight years later, the Kulbir Singh Barapind case has not yet been decided, although he has since been shifted from immigration detention to more secure imprisonment—where he is housed with the full complement of criminal offenders (murderers, thieves, child molesters, etc.). Despite the lack of a conviction for any crime from a U.S. court,

the author of a textbook on terrorism called *Political Crime* saw fit to include Barapind in a boxed list of foreign terrorists on American soil (Hagan 1997, 142). Innocent until proven guilty does not seem to hold true for this category of suspects. And there is no one to take up a suit on behalf of such an individual when his guilt is assumed by writers of books used to train future criminal and judicial system personnel, educate young political scientists, and update others following developments in the "sexy" arena of terrorism.

I used the above adjective consciously, for there is nothing more damaging to the realistic understanding of the phenomenon popularly called terrorism than the thrum of excitement generated by any mention of it. Every scholar who works in this area has experienced the skepticism of colleagues who suggest that their interest in the study of violence must stem from some sort of macho adventurism (if male) or personal titillation (if female) rather than academic interest per se (see, e.g., Bourgois 1995; Nordstrom 1997). My suggestion in this article is that the adrenaline-charged milieu in which the concept of terrorism flourishes is itself an indicator of the term's mythic power and that deconstructing the myth in favor of reasonable ethnographic assessment is the first step in actually working toward curbing such violence in the future.

### TERROR'S SEDUCTION

Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass (1997) have written a provocative essay on terrorism's hold on the Western popular imagination. They pointed out that public fears of terrorism as indicated through innumerable studies far outpace the actual numbers of casualties from acts of political violence, which remain today quite minimal relative to victims of murder, car accidents, overdoses, any number of diseases, and so on. (At some points in recent years, the number of Americans killed by terrorists was actually lower than those killed by bee stings, choking on sandwiches, or lightning strikes, although terrorism remained a top choice on surveys of major concerns of Americans, according to studies cited by Zulaika and Douglass 1997.) These authors, drawing on Taussig (1987), considered the notion that the figure of the terrorist has become "the wild man" of our contemporary imagination, entirely outside the pale of human society, unpredictable, unreasonable,

unapproachable—and scary. The fact that several otherwise intelligent people, on learning of my work with Sikh militants who carry religiously mandated swords, asked whether I am not afraid that one of them might suddenly decide to slice me up, shows the wild-man tenor of these notions of terrorism. Although Sikh militants engage in acts of radical political violence, it is the *image* of the unpredictable, irrational, and barbaric that comes to the fore in such reactions. Likewise for the Greek Cypriot women with whom I have also worked, who have nightmares of "Turks" (I use quotes to show that it is the classic figure of Islamic barbarism and not the Turkish men and women of today who are actually imagined) coming over the mountains with curved swords flashing, intent on rape and pillage. Note that the fear of further violence in Cyprus is itself not irrational; unfortunately, Greek-Turkish conflict may again break out on that beleaguered island. But if the Turkish army ventures into southern Cyprus, it will be with tanks and fighter jets, not with long curved swords.

Nowhere is the idea of the terrorist as a mythic rather than human figure more apparent than in the almost universal assumption on the part of both academicians and policy makers that people engaged in this kind of violence are unapproachable. Even in our blossoming field of the anthropology of violence, far more studies are devoted to the victims of violence than to the perpetrators of violence (indeed, studies that engage perpetrators directly are quite rare). And in the entire field of counterterrorism studies, there are only a handful of "experts" who have actually dealt with their subject matter directly. Those who purport to have inside knowledge of groups called terrorists usually mean they have read the publications of the group or follow the Internet postings of the group or have gotten hold of a diary of a former member of the group, not that they have actually taken "the risks of the face to face," as Levinas would say. (Indeed, I have been on a panel in which a known terrorism expert held forth at length on the subject of Sikh terrorist groups, not recognizing that the audience was filled with individuals that someone even mildly involved with the Sikh community would know as militants.) Studies of terrorism conducted by our top government agencies *begin* with the assumption that it is only going to be factors observable from outside that can be used in predicting and presumably thwarting terrorist episodes. There is almost no other field I can think of that starts from the assumption that real knowledge of the subject is impossible—or even undesirable, as a writer as eminent as Conor

Cruise O'Brien (1995) maintained, fearing that understanding terrorism is tantamount to condoning it. It is an Alice-in-Wonderland world, based on a concept no one can clearly define, involving people no one can approach, but centering on life-and-death issues whose importance no one dare ignore.

Although many progressive-minded academics follow journalist Christopher Hitchens in declining to even use the word terrorism to describe groups varying from third-world revolutionaries to suburban religious cultists to "rogue states" like Libya, the term is in no danger of falling into disuse among the policy makers who hold in their hands the fuses to the bombs that will fall on Afghan camps. Whatever our feelings toward Osama bin Laden and his comrades inhabiting those camps, we all have to care about the repercussions of such bombings, which can turn thousands of bin Laden sympathizers even further against the United States and against, indeed, all Americans or even all Westerners. Ethnographers who study communities in which human rights abuses take place—which are very often the same communities from which militant groups arise—also have to care about what policy makers think of terrorists, because U.S. policy matters in terms of exacerbating or constraining continuing rights abuses in the home country and in terms of rejecting or accepting refugees fleeing abuses who attempt to come here. While it is all too tempting to righteously refuse to be tainted by the discourse of the policy arena (which in the terrorism subarena does off-putting things like calling information "intel" and participant observation "infiltration"), I argue that stepping forward to take a role in processes of governmental and judicial decision making is, in some cases, the morally responsible thing to do. Anthropology has been burned by historical episodes of governmental entanglement, to be sure (e.g., in the Vietnam conflict; see Watkin 1992), but with careful ethical and methodological scrutiny, I believe that some level of interaction between academy and polity is in many cases mandated.

With our experience in accommodating to other cultural worlds, anthropologists should be well able to adjust to the unique "beltway culture" of Washington. One has to learn a whole new language, not so as to adopt it oneself but so as to be able to explain to those who use it in the first place why it is inadequate. (They will not learn our language first; it is going to work the other way or not at all.) Then, too, there are all the subcultures of the different agencies relating to one's topic. For example, the Department of State defines terrorism as "premeditated,

politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine state agents." But the Department of Defense defines it as "the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence by a revolutionary organization against individuals or property with the intention of coercing or intimidating governments or societies, often for political or ideological purposes." This is rather an important divergence since the State Department perspective allows for the notion of the state as terrorist while the Defense Department perspective does not. Furthermore, the Defense Department definition considers even *threatened* use of force as terrorism, while the State Department definition restricts the label "terrorism" to *actual* episodes of violence. These are serious differences, not mere verbiage. Nevertheless, there it is. An anthropologist in discussion with the State Department or Defense Department—even an anthropologist proposing the inappropriateness of either definition—has to develop a certain facility with the terms used by governmental interlocutors. (The FBI, CIA, and other agencies each, again, have their own definitions; truly, it is a multilingual environment to which an intrusive anthropologist must adapt!)

Fortunately, within U.S. government circles there has recently been a move toward a wider understanding of the range of violent actors we face in the world today and a fresh willingness to consider input from specialists in culture, religion, and other areas that provide critical contexts for evaluating and dealing with violence. At a recent colloquium convened for a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) project on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and economists complemented the more traditional core of security experts in discussing the potential for use of chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons by terrorist groups. Agencies such as the DIA, which confront life-and-death issues daily, cannot afford the complacency of ignoring alternative viewpoints concerning the threats faced by the U.S. military. Such openness is certainly a positive development. But these pockets of innovative thinking still exist within an overall political culture in which it is normative to view the problem of terrorism in entirely black-and-white terms.

Just as the acts of violence we call terrorist seduce us into watching (that bomb blast), waiting (for the building to crumble), and worrying (that these attacks portend the end of stability and civilization as we

know it), so too does the antiterrorist rhetoric so dominant today seduce us with its good-versus-evil simplifications. The language of witchcraft and witch-hunts was, in another era, equally persuasive. That is why it is not only my militant Sikh interlocutors who jokingly refer to "the T word" (this is the intense sort of humor that faces the anthropologist of violence) but scholars with insight as well. Terrorism is a concept that mystifies rather than illuminates; it is a political and not an academic notion. Dropping it from one's repertoire allows a more clear-headed grasp on the violence and counterviolence that all of us would like to see eliminated.

### ANTHROPOLOGY AS INTERVENTION

I have spent the past ten years studying the Sikh separatist movement in Punjab, northwest India. This initiative toward an independent Sikh state, to be called Khalistan, spawned a militant wing that during the 1980s and 1990s involved thousands of individuals. The crackdown against insurgency by the Indian government was extreme; extrajudicial executions, "disappearances," custodial rapes, and ubiquitous torture earned India the condemnation of every major international human rights organization. But at the same time, the Khalistani militants moved beyond the international laws of armed conflict to commit atrocities against Punjabi civilians. Over the twenty years of conflict, tens of thousands of people (viable estimates range from thirty thousand to one hundred thousand) were killed, and Khalistan was not established. (See Pettigrew 1995; Mahmood 1996b; and Kumar 1996 for detailed accounts of the Punjab conflict.)

Today, although the world remains largely unaware of the human rights atrocities committed by the government of India, it is all too cognizant of "the Sikh terrorist" as a figure of fear and loathing. Indicative of the persuasiveness of this image is an episode from the novel *Jasmine*, by the award-winning novelist Bharati Mukherjee (1989): a Sikh appears just once, shoots up a store full of shoppers for no apparent reason, then disappears. The flatness of this character, with its utterly inexplicable violence, is the terrorist par excellence. It is what most of India, and much of the world, now thinks about the Sikhs, however useless this conception is in actually understanding why some of them have taken up arms. (Let us emphasize that it is only a tiny minority of Sikhs who

are involved in violence, despite a continuing measure of support for Khalistani separatism.)

Pervasive conceptions such as that of the Sikh terrorist, however, severely limit the effectiveness of policy makers in Washington, Ottawa, or London in dealing with Sikh affairs. They encourage the notion that minimal investigations are really all that are needed, since in the end the irrationality of terrorists is assumed. Particularly where acts of insurgent violence involve religious concepts like, in the Sikh case, martyrdom, the tendency is to dismiss the alien theology as not understandable (hence irrelevant) from the start. Scholars such as Scott Appleby (1999) and Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) have recently delved further into religious violence as a viable subject of study, and these steps in the right direction are in fact being taken seriously in the decision-making centers of the world. But we have a long way to go to convince political and military leaders that there is more to be understood about violent movements than how to kill their members.

It is a particular challenge to an anthropologist attempting to translate the cultural realities of religiously motivated activists like the Sikhs into Western policy talk without either overfamiliarizing or overexoticizing them. For example, a case arose a few years ago in which a prominent Sikh militant, having fled to the United States with his wife and young son, was alleged to have kidnapped an Indian politician. This case was a particularly intense one in which to be involved, as the hostage survived the episode to write his own narrative of the course of events. Apparently, at one point after the kidnapping, when the hostage was being held in a safe house until the militants' conditions were met, he was kept underneath a bed with the Sikh in question. The Sikh's own young son was allegedly lying atop the bed, so that if police visited the house the mother could claim that he suffered from a highly contagious illness and advise police to leave. Meanwhile, the Sikh under the bed was said to be whispering to the hostage that if he made a sound or any movement, they would all be blown up by a grenade he held in his hand. A relevant question was, is it culturally plausible that a father would indeed kill his own son in a situation like this? Answering yes to this question obviously demands further contextualization if the courtroom audience is not to come away viewing the Sikhs as utter barbarians. (In the event, the Sikh and his wife were extradited back to India, where they remain in prison; the son is in foster care in California.)

For believing Sikhs, the theological principle of "living with one's head in one's hands," that is, without any sense of ego, translates into an utter fearlessness with regard to death and a willingness to martyr oneself without question. Some of the best known episodes in Sikh religious history involve the sacrifice of children, such as the sons of the last Sikh Guru being bricked up alive inside a wall or the mothers who proudly wore the chopped-up bodies of their children as garlands when faced with the most horrific of persecutions. In the current Khalistan movement, this heritage continues to be celebrated; a poster showing Sikh children at a summer youth camp carries a caption noting that "a nation may raise its flag with pride when the bones of its children lie buried in walls," and a poignant song heralds a mother who bravely regrets that she has only two sons, "not even enough to make a necklace." Because of the principle of living free from fear, of living solely for truth and for God without second thoughts, Sikhs experience such episodes—that others of us view with horror—as moments of joy and liberation. Adult Sikhs believe that the best lesson for their children is to provide this model of fearlessness and selflessness as well. While such explanations may make no difference to a U.S. court deciding the fate of a six-year-old boy—cultural relativism aside, we choose to keep him here—they do have repercussions in terms of whether we view an individual who risks the life of his son as a deviant psychopath or as acting within some kind of norms, however objectionable those norms are to us (see Mahmood 1997).

As anthropologists, we clearly face a special challenge in circumstances like these if we opt to serve as expert witnesses in which our knowledge can be of help. Renato Rosaldo (1989) did an excellent job of managing to explain and humanize Ilongot headhunters to his readership, to take just one ethnographic example; but then, the Ilongot were not coming across the U.S. borders to hunt *our* heads! Obviously, the stakes get higher, and the barriers to cultural translation stronger, when the groups we study function transnationally. With most terrorist organizations, this is exactly the case. We are not disinterested observers, and we cannot expect anybody to be.

In a second case involving cultural plausibility, a Sikh adolescent girl was seeking asylum in the United States, and I was asked again to provide expert testimony. Her father, Gajinder Singh, was the known founder of the militant organization called Dal Khalsa ("army of the pure") who had hijacked an airplane to Pakistan in 1981 and served

fourteen years in jail there for the crime. Now released from jail, he lives in a hidden and guarded compound, attempting to revive the Dal Khalsa through cyberspace. If the adolescent daughter were deported from the United States, what would be her likely future with her father in the third country? Is her father culturally likely to try to recruit the daughter into the ranks of the Dal Khalsa? Gender issues arise here. Despite Sikhism's proclaimed gender equality, in fact because this individual is female, it is not likely that this would be the outcome. Nevertheless, the U.S. court refrains from sending her to the third country (or to India, where she may suffer because of her father's activities). She remains here, looking forward to college.

There are more concrete issues, however, in which an anthropologist can participate in Western legal and policy settings. Typically, our on-the-ground knowledge far exceeds that of experts called on by our courts and government, and we can offer important correctives to mistakes that can radically affect the lives of the people we study.

### ANTHROPOLOGY AS CORRECTIVE

Let me give an example of how seriously limited official understandings of an insurgent movement can be and of how relatively simple it is for a scholar who knows better to have an impact on the course of events.

In 1998, I was called to Toronto to serve as an expert witness in a Sikh removal (deportation) case. The individual had applied for political asylum in Canada, but the question of whether he had a well-founded fear of persecution back in India (the issue on which the asylum decision would rest) took a back seat to the issue of whether he posed a security threat to Canada. Evidence was given by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) that this agency believed the answer to the latter question to be positive. The Sikh had at one point been involved in the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF), in the faction called Mehta-Chawla. In the court, a CSIS report emerged that stated that the Mehta-Chawla faction was a violent faction, in distinction to other factions that embraced democratic and peaceful means. I knew it to be a fact, however, that the Mehta-Chawla and Manjit factions were the non-violent, and the Bittu faction the violent, sections of the AISSF. "Where did you get this information about Mehta-Chawla?" I asked. It turned

out that "a top terrorism expert" had provided it. Being a scholar, I tracked down the terrorism expert's writings about the Sikh insurgency, where indeed he claimed that Mehta-Chawla was the violent faction. The claim was footnoted, and in the note (which perhaps CSIS, though Canada's premier intelligence agency, failed to check?) referenced an article in *India Today*, an Indian news magazine something like *Time* but probably less reliable. The point is that information purportedly from "intelligence" had in fact derived from a simple journalist's report in a popular magazine. And it was wrong.

The implications are twofold. First, defining Mehta-Chawla as a violent faction when it was not could earn its members the critical label of terrorists and, conversely, could allow members of the actually violent Bittu faction entry into Canada without particular scrutiny. Second, many asylum applicants to Canada in fact came from the nonviolent Mehta-Chawla and Manjit factions, and although of all the radical Sikhs applying for refugee status those would be precisely the ones most Canadians would like to see actually settled in Canada, this mistake would push aside those committed to peaceful means in favor of those not so committed. In other words, it is a serious mistake.

From CSIS, this mistaken labeling of AISSF Mehta-Chawla as violent found its way into the official reports of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) of Canada, on which judges in Canada rely for information and which are also circulated around the world wherever refugee decisions are being made. (Note that Canadian IRB reports are the best in the world; this example of a mistake should not be taken as an indictment of this superior reporting agency.) The U.S. Department of State, in its own report on country conditions in India, follows the Canadian lead in two places, once referring to AISSF Mehta-Chawla as "violence prone" and in another place calling it "the violent faction." No doubt this label has found its way into other countries' assessments as well since Canada is widely regarded as the pioneer in refugee affairs, its documentation branch being the most thorough and up to date.

Thankfully, Canada and the United States have independent judiciaries, and an anthropologist who testifies as an expert witness that Mehta-Chawla is in fact not a violent but a nonviolent faction does have a chance of being heard. Since Sikhs of the AISSF were among the primary informants for my study *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Mahmood 1996b), I have felt compelled to correct the error that could mean life or death for some of them by participating

in the court proceedings where my information might be of use. In the past seven years, I have testified as an expert on Sikh militancy in many of these Canadian and U.S. courts, and I can say that the judges involved have uniformly been willing to listen with respect to my views on the subject. In fact, I cannot think of a Mehta-Chawla asylum case that has not been won subsequent to my reporting on the history of this error. What this means is that people have been saved from the probability of torture, had their asylum cases been lost and had they therefore been returned to India. How can an anthropologist *not* come forward under these circumstances? And, in fact, the system is more responsive than one may think; not only judges but also the Immigration and Naturalization Services and State Department have proven willing to hear differing views from outside. At least in this case, the image of an opaque, hulking government that does not pay attention to academics is not correct—perhaps merely a sop to our own reluctance in not getting involved in real-world issues where the consequences can be more severe than a negative book review or a declined promotion.

As monitors of our own governments, we can serve as checks to propaganda as well as offering correctives to innocent mistakes. The U.S. Department of State, in 1996, reported that the militant leader Bittu (proper name Daljit Singh Khalsa) had voluntarily returned to India, served a brief time in jail, and was now free. This was reported as an indication that other Sikh militants could likewise return to India without fear and was accompanied by other statements about the "normalcy" of life in Punjab. The thing is that Bittu was at that time in Tihar jail in Delhi, and is now incarcerated at Nabha Jail in Punjab. It is one of India's most famous prisons, and Bittu was prior to his capture one of India's top ten wanted persons. There is simply no possibility that the U.S. State Department did not know the real situation when it produced this report. Bittu's own attorney flew in from India to confirm that, yes, the militant leader was still incarcerated. The two of us had to repeat again and again that the report was outright wrong and that if the message was that other militants should feel safe to return to India, this was not evidence to that effect. We suspected that the Indian government, in its attempt to lure militants back for prosecution, put out that information, and our Department of State for its own reasons picked it up for dissemination.

But the report was having a negative effect in terms of human rights, because across the United States judges were sending Sikhs back to

India on the presumption that all was well. We now know that some of those suffered torture and other abuses on their return.

## COMPLICATIONS

Things get more complex when we turn from human rights issues to questions of militant violence *per se*. When we move from the Mehta-Chawla to the Bittu faction that in fact *is* the wing of AISSF that supports the establishment of an independent Sikh state of Khalistan by any means necessary (i.e., it allows for the use of force), we find ourselves facing critical moral choices. Most anthropologists would agree that activism on behalf of the human rights of the community one studies is a legitimate professional service. But the ethics of responsibility "to the people studied," long a primary axiom of the American Anthropological Association, become muddled when the people studied engage in acts defined as criminal. If one is asked to give information about them to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, for example, would it not be a breach of trust with the community to do so? On the other hand, one cannot be (or at least most anthropologists would not consider being) an aider and abettor of political violence.

I wrote in a previous article about the methods of working in this kind of environment (Mahmood 1996a) that honesty with one's interlocutors on all sides is the best insurance against the misunderstandings that can have very serious repercussions in terms of not only one's career but one's personal safety as well. Today, I would go even further, stating that not mere honesty but utter transparency is what is required, plus a very firm groundedness in one's own political, ethical, and methodological stance. You have to show precisely the same face to both militant and government interlocutors and be clear to both that you are not going behind the back of one to talk with the other. As Jeff Sluka (1992) noted in one of his insightful articles about this methodology, you can never allow yourself the luxury of complacency or of thinking of this work as a kind of game (see also Sluka 1995). It demands constant vigilance and is almost unbearably exhausting—not to say lonely, as there are rarely others who share your particular set of contacts and understandings. Yet, it is not impossible. I have done it with the Sikhs, and others have done it with other groups—Zulaika (1988), with ETA (Basque separatist) activists, most effectively.

While it is by reason of political and methodological complications that many scholars simply do not consider studying militant cultures or, if they do, do not consider getting involved in the world of policy concerning them, the political costs of our noninvolvement are as great as the human costs. Few non-Sikh Americans know, for example, that some twenty to thirty congressional representatives regularly sign letters to our president or to heads of state of other countries supporting the notion of an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. They read into the Congressional Record long statements condemning India for its suppression of Sikhs and calling on the United States to impose sanctions on India until it allows the self-determination of its religious minorities. This activity on Capitol Hill is largely the result of a single Sikh lobbying office established in Washington after the atrocities of 1984 that led to the Khalistan movement. This lobbying activity is entirely legitimate and aboveboard, but the fact is that over the past fifteen years, a certain portrait of the Khalistan movement has woven its way into the perceptions of those members of Congress who have shown any interest (or more typically, whose aides have shown any interest), and it is one that is peculiar to this lobbying office rather than a generally held vision of the movement. Several congresspersons of significance regularly refer to the director of this office as the "president of the government of Khalistan in exile," a title that many or most Khalistanis (including virtually all militants) would deny.

Like many insurgent movements, Sikh separatism has been fraught with division and fracture and competing claims to paramouncy. My point is that when you have chairpersons of foreign-relations committees in the national legislature according weight to the very limited information they have about the movement toward Sikh independence, this can have very serious effects. No scholar of the Sikhs would ever make the mistake of calling the individual in question a president of Khalistan in exile, but the scholarly literature simply does not seem to make it into the halls of Congress—unless somebody specifically brings it there. We all know about bungled operations in foreign lands in which the United States has seemed not to have a realistic grasp of the on-the-ground situation. We can see one in the making right here.

Another role in which I am currently involved relates to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in The Hague, an institution to which Khalistani Sikhs have recently applied for recognition. Since the decline in the militancy over the past several years, many

of the Khalistani leaders are looking for new political arenas in which to assert their case for independence. Although factional problems have crippled any attempts at political assertion previously, last year a serious effort was made to bring various guerilla groups, political parties, and other representative organizations together to form a coalition that could claim a UNPO seat. This effort is still under way. But meanwhile, I was contacted by Dr. Seif Sharif Hamad of Zanzibar, president of the UNPO General Assembly, for potential help in evaluating an eventual Sikh claim. According to the rules of the UNPO, applicants for a seat must demonstrate that (1) their people constitute a nation, (2) the applicants are true representatives of that nation, and (3) their efforts toward recognized nationhood are nonviolent. These are very interesting criteria, of course, not least because the very first premise is problematic in terms of current anthropological understandings of collectivity and authenticity. The second only an insider would really know about (not, e.g., the U.S. Congress), and the third is fraught with the difficulties of propaganda and counterpropaganda that are hideously difficult to weed through. But if it is not anthropologists who are suited for this kind of task, who is?

The UNPO is just one example of the trend toward supranational expressions of concern and alliance. In Britain, one of the countries in which Sikhs have settled in large numbers, the European Convention has several times played the role of overriding Britain's own national interests where Sikh activists are concerned. I testified in one such case at the Old Bailey this past summer. Although two Sikh activists were very potentially a threat to the national security of the United Kingdom, Article 3 of the European Convention (in part a prohibition against deporting an individual to a situation in which he or she is likely to face torture) took precedence. The three judges hearing the case wrote very clearly in the final decision of their discomfort in granting the Sikhs leave to stay in the United Kingdom under these circumstances. ("British citizens may understandably feel discomfort with the idea of having a terrorist living next door.") But the larger European law prevailed. Home Minister Jack Straw publicly disagreed with the findings in this highly publicized case, noting (as against my testimony) that the Indian high commissioner to the United Kingdom had personally assured him that no torture was occurring anywhere in India. But even Jack Straw's opinion was not enough to override the law.

The Khalistani Sikhs as a group harbor no sort of enmity toward the United States or any other Western country, in fact. (The two in Britain were alleged to be arranging shipments of explosives to India, not preparing to use them in the United Kingdom.) Since many Sikhs have sought and received refuge in the West, they have a stake in keeping any violence contained in South Asia, lest they be booted out of their exile locations. One thing this means is that I have up until now not been put in the untenable position of being pulled in different directions by my responsibilities toward my informants and my responsibilities as an American citizen. The leadership of the Sikh diaspora itself wants to ensure that any renegades or criminals be weeded out because it does not want the taint of violence to spread over the entire community.

Since November 2000, however, we all face a new situation that will be fraught with challenges. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Vancouver arrested and charged two Sikhs with the 1985 bombing of an Air India jet that killed 329 people. These arrests were the result of a massive investigation lasting fifteen years—the most expensive and extensive in Canadian history—and there may be more arrests to come. The trial that will eventually take place is sure to be one of those high-profile, drawn-out events that mesmerize entire nations. And, as an expert on Sikh militancy, I face new questions about my appropriate role. Should I be asked, as a specialist on the Khalistan movement, to provide expertise to the Crown in an eventual trial, I would do so in the belief that the Sikh community would benefit best by having this event handled in the most low-key manner possible, treating the episode as a criminal matter whose perpetrators if found guilty must be punished according to the law of the land but otherwise dealing respectfully with both the Sikh religion and the independence movement. In this case, I know that the numbers of experts on Khalistan who could or would actually do this are severely limited. Most in the pool of candidates for such a role would surely inflame events further by continuing the unfortunate trend in Canada of painting the Khalistanis and even the Sikhs as a whole as terrorists and madmen. Already, the civil liberties and rights of the Sikh minority in Canada (most members of which have nothing at all to do with politics, far less violence) are fragile, and the Bill Kunstlers who will defend them vigorously are few and far between.

But this will not be an easy choice to make because there are certain to be those within the Sikh community who will view any cooperation

with the Canadian government in this matter as collaboration in what they may see as an attempt to frame the Sikhs for a crime they did not commit. Here is where one's record of integrity with the community, the academy, and the government becomes totally critical. One cannot know or control the outcome of choosing to take a stand in such slippery circumstances. But the alternative is simply to hide in the ivory tower, and with 329 lives lost in the bombing, and the entire Sikh community of North America in some ways at stake, this is not an option I personally can consider.

### PROGRESS

Against the melodramatic court scene with which I opened this article, exacerbating tensions between the Sikh community and the wider American society witnessing such a farce, consider another hearing in which a judge, known for her progressivism and having taken the time to read my work and the work of others on the Sikhs, chose a different tack. A Khalistani man alleged to have participated in the hostage taking of a Romanian diplomat in Delhi was brought into the courtroom heavily shackled. The judge looked at him and said to the security guard behind him, "I want all restraints except minimal handcuffing removed from that man." The guard, plus the government attorneys, protested strongly that the security risk was too great. But she was insistent. "This is my courtroom and I will not hear this case under these circumstances. This shackling is prejudicial and demeaning and I want it removed." It took some time and discussion and gathering of consent (including mine, as I was seated directly next to him as expert witness), but eventually he was down to minimal handcuffs. But this judge went further. When he began to testify on his own behalf, the Sikh took an inordinately long time explaining his religious beliefs rather than simply summarizing events, as is usually done. Over objections from the government, she insisted that this man would have the opportunity to tell the court his story, in his own terms, as long as it took. It took some six months of off-and-on court dates and produced, ultimately, some six hundred pages of testimony. A waste of taxpayer dollars? I do not think so. In the end, the judge acknowledged that this individual had suffered greatly in India and would be a candidate for asylum in the United States, were it not for his involvement in violent activities in the

Khalistani insurgency. He is still in prison today because of her ultimately negative ruling on the case. The judge was, therefore, not soft on terrorism; she made the hard and brave decision she felt the law compelled her to make. But the point is that the Sikh militant in question now harbors no ill feeling either toward that judge or toward the U.S. judicial system as a whole. "I had my day in court," he commented. "That's all we've been asking for, our day in the court of world opinion." A far cry from the dangerous resentment engendered by the inordinately rough handling and overblown security experienced in many terrorism cases. We must hope that the Air India case will be dealt with as carefully.

The accusation that "if one treats and speaks of one's militant interlocutors as human beings like oneself, one must be naive or foolish" is one that I and others involved in this work hear regularly. We use our knowledge to combat this image, but it persists nonetheless. In the case of the Khalistani Sikhs, it is significant that most of the non-Sikh Westerners closely involved in writing, speaking, and testifying about this movement are women: in addition to myself, attorney Mary Pike, and Canadian MP Colleen Beaumier, there is Dr. Ami Laws of Stanford and Physicians for Human Rights and Joyce Pettigrew of Queens University Belfast. Barbara Crossette of the *New York Times* is another who has written effectively about the conflict in Punjab, and Patti Grossman of Human Rights Watch has played an important role in many issues. As females, we are particularly vulnerable to the "naivete" accusation. Yet, we seem to be the ones who dare to actually interact with people who those in the spy-versus-spy game are content to merely despise from a distance, and who have figured out ways to do so safely and effectively. It is hard realism, not naivete, that enables one to function among such groups; a naif could not long survive.

Based on my experience in this limited case, I believe that women will play a key role in demythologizing some of the terrorism rhetoric that makes people involved in violence seem so unapproachable, so needing-to-be-shackled. As Nordstrom and Robben (1995) pointed out, violence is not something apart from the human experience but is of a piece with it, and as such can be studied and understood just as we study and understand other aspects of the human experience. If one drops the breathless tone of a war reporter and simply *talks* to people, a lot of defensive walls come down more quickly than one might expect. A few years ago, at a *mujahideen* camp near the Line of Control in

Pakistani Kashmir, I was sipping Kashmiri tea on the floor of a tent with some of the "boys" when I noticed a BBC reporter some distance away. With full complement of flak jacket, helmet, and army boots, he was interviewing fighters who had recently come over the border from India. The interview was fine as far as it went, and the journalist was well informed and asked intelligent and penetrating questions, as BBC reporters are wont to do. But he will never get the real story, the human story, from that kind of encounter. People want to see that you are as vulnerable as they are and that you trust them enough not to mind being *vulnerable to them*. So you decline bulletproofing and put your sleeping bag down next to theirs, and you have a cup of tea. That is when those militants will actually open up and tell you who they *are*, not just what they have done.

When an FBI special agent for counterterrorism later approached me regarding my visit to the Kashmiri Line of Control, I explained in a direct manner where I had been and what my professional role was. I was still wearing the Pakistani *salwar-kameez* with its modest head scarf (*not* army fatigues) when our conversation occurred. "So you've managed to infiltrate Harkat-ul-Ansar!" he said, seemingly impressed. It was the outfit alleged to have taken four Westerners hostage and to have decapitated one. Their camps, in a military zone, were thought to be out of bounds. In the event, it had not been all that difficult to go there. This whole encounter reminded me of the time when I attended an entirely public Sikh seminar about the concept of self-determination, and a Defense Department official told me that "whatever intel I could bring back would be most appreciated." This is an aspect of the culture of counterterrorism, which thrives on the shivery and shadowy world in which open-air camps are imagined as underground bunkers and public meetings are imagined as clandestine. As Zulaika and Douglass (1997) pointed out, that Hollywood mythos paradoxically empowers precisely those terrorists one wants to combat since they are accorded more important status than many of them actually deserve. Remember those casualty figures? Harkat-ul-Ansar must be taken very seriously, but it is not composed of gods—or devils.

In several legal arenas, vigorous young attorneys intent on cross-examining an expert witness such as myself have brought up the Timothy McVeigh/Oklahoma City bombing. It has actually become a rather tiresome counterthrust after repeated hearings, but the obvious goal of bringing this domestic case into a trial of Sikh separatists is to evoke in

others and me the natural horrified reaction of Americans to this atrocity committed on home turf. The implied parallel: Timothy McVeigh is irrational, twisted, and dangerous, and these Sikhs must be also. Indeed, the hegemonic consensus in American society with regard to Timothy McVeigh is every bit as pervasive as the popular consensus in India with regard to the Sikhs. The author Gore Vidal has been about the only prominent intellectual figure to give the McVeigh/Oklahoma City case even the time of day. As of this writing, McVeigh is about to be executed by lethal injection downstate from here in Terre Haute, Indiana, so passions are running particularly high around me as I write. What can one say about this troubling parallel? I believe that one lesson to be learned here, which may be an addendum to the old "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," is that sometimes it takes individuals from outside the targeted population of a violent movement to accurately and realistically assess what that violence means. Any victim or imagined victim is likely to exaggerate the evil qualities of the attacker, and that exaggeration is precisely what leads to the chronic overresponse that characterizes counterterrorism efforts. Since it is overresponse that often escalates violence into a higher level, realism rather than a myth-based quest for retribution is the best recipe we know of for the prevention of higher and higher rounds of violence.

Likewise, using the discourse of peace and reconciliation is sometimes not the best way to actually achieve a reduction in tensions and the violence that results from them. This is a paradox only in a world view that does not allow for other cognitive frames than that of the liberal West. How can anyone be against peace? One thinks. But as anthropologists, we know well that such concepts carry vastly different connotations in many parts of the world in which we work. Across the immense crescent of the Islamic world, for example, there are many audiences for whom the word *peace* implies acquiescence to an unjust order and not a positive goal in itself. The word is simply not heard the same way, and anyone negotiating for a real cessation of conflict can be aided by this kind of ethnographic insight. Peace plays well at home but maybe not among the violent actors with whom one is attempting interlocution.

There is a certain danger to pursuing work with people engaged in matters such as these, obviously. One must take care not to slip into the "heroic" mode that has tempted anthropologists right from the beginnings of our discipline (Dubois 1995). Heroism in this field can easily

