

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

**Gibb Schreffler - Signs of Separation: *Dhol* in Punjabi Culture (UC Santa Barbara, July 2010)**

### ABSTRACT

The musical instrument *dhol* is a sign (something that stands for something, to somebody, as per C.S. Peirce) of Punjabi culture. It signifies on many fronts, evoking a number of sentiments and associations. This thesis concerns the expansive web of signification related to the *dhol*. A rich case study, it offers the possibility of tracking the development of such a multidimensional sign as it has historically broadened its range. It hopes to demonstrate and offer explanations for how the spectrum of associations with an object may become so broad as to thoroughly embody a cultural identity. Being a work of ethnomusicology, this thesis emphasizes the role played by music in this phenomenon.

This research finds that a historical confluence of musical genres, instruments, and migrations set the stage for the emergence of various cultural phenomena that would cohere as a “sign-complex.” Its signs worked synergistically to spread the signification of *dhol* and an increasing number of related signs. Through such a process, *dhol* was linked to the aesthetic theme of separation. The real-life experience of being away from one’s home or loved ones is common in the Punjab region, as its history is checkered with uprooting and migration, division and Diaspora. In the current era, the theme of separation has taken on a new dimension, where the separation represents not only the emotional gap between loved ones, but also the spatial and cultural gap between Punjabis generally and the land of Punjab. While the *dhol* was becoming a national emblem, in part through its connection with mobilized folkloric dances, a globally-oriented Punjabi identity was also developing. Aspects of this identity, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, were embodied in the *dhol*.

This work constitutes the first ethnography of Punjabi *dhol*-players as well as a documentation of fading performance traditions. Part One describes the professional communities that are engaged in playing music in Punjab. Part Two details the *dhol*’s history, construction, use, and playing manner. Part Three presents the allied genres of literature, song, and dance that give support to the theme of separation and, ultimately, the sign-complex of *dhol*.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

### Current Research

Dr. Schreffler is currently working with The Center on the topic of *shabad kirtan*. His research constitutes an investigation into the development of the role of music in Sikh practice. It examines particularly the discourse surrounding this development, including the development of a currently popular term for “Sikh Music,” *gurmat sangeet*. Schreffler’s work combines a broad reading of the Punjabi-language sources with insights from ethnographic work in Punjab.