



Informational Memorandum on the Religious Practices of Sikhs

Topic: Wearing of the *Kesh* (Uncut Hair)

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The word "Sikh" means disciple or student. Sikhs are students and followers of *Guru Nanak* (b. 1469), the founder of the Sikh religious tradition, and the nine *Gurus* (divinely inspired prophet-teachers) who succeeded him. Though sometimes mistaken for members of a sect of Hinduism or Islam, Sikhs belong to a distinct religion with its own unique divine scripture called the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the eternal spiritual *Guru* of the Sikhs. The *Gurus* wrote the holy text themselves without the use of any intermediaries.

On March 30, 1699, *Guru Gobind Singh*--the tenth and final human Sikh *Guru*--established a new, voluntary order of the Sikhs, called the *Khalsa* (meaning "belonging only to the Divine"). The *Khalsa* consists of Sikhs who undergo a initiation ceremony and dedicate themselves to living by the high standards of the Sikh *Gurus* at all times, as well as maintaining their physical distinctiveness in society by maintaining five articles of faith. The *Khalsa* sisterhood and brotherhood upheld the highest Sikh virtues through the harshest and most difficult times in Sikh history.

One of the more conspicuous and noteworthy of the five articles of faith is the *Kesh* (uncut hair), which is kept covered by a distinctive turban. The other articles are the *Kirpan* (ceremonial sword), *Kara* (steel bracelet), *Kanga* (small wooden comb) and *Kaccha* (breeches). These five articles of faith are an integral part of a Sikh's faith and all have deep religious meanings for Sikhs who wear them to honor the teachings, wishes, and their faith in their beloved *Gurus*.

Uncut hair is one of five articles of faith that Sikhs must have at all times. Sikhs who have undergone a ceremony of adult baptism/confirmation, known as *Amrit*, are required to keep all five articles of faith. Moreover, all Sikhs, both male and female, are supposed to keep uncut hair on all parts of their body, even if they have not been confirmed.

The edict of *Guru Gobind Singh* to keep uncut hair is manifested in the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (Code of Conduct and Conventions) as follows:

Section Four, Chapter X, Article XVI, Living in Consonance with Guru's tenants

- (i) A Sikh should, in no way, harbor any antipathy to the hair of the head with which his child is born. He should not temper with the hair with which the child is born... A Sikh should keep the hair of his sons and daughters intact.

Section Six, Chapter XIII, Article XXIV, Ceremony of Baptism and Initiation

...The person to be baptized must have taken bath and washed the hair and must wear all five K's [Articles of Faith] - *Kesh* (uncut hair), *Kirpan* (ceremonial sword), *Kachhehra* (breeches), *Kanga* (small wooden comb), *Karha* (steel bracelet)....

... The under mentioned four transgressions (tabooed practices) must be avoided:

- (1) Dishonoring the hair;
- (2) Eating the meat of an animal slaughtered the Muslim way;
- (3) Cohabiting with a person other than one's spouse;
- (4) Using tobacco.

In the event of the commission of any of these transgressions, the transgressor must get rebaptized [reinitiated]. If a transgression is committed unintentionally and unknowingly, the transgressor shall not be liable to punishment. You must not associate with a Sikh who had uncut hair earlier and has cut it or...

To put this all in context, when Sikhs were being religiously persecuted, and confronted with a choice between conversion to Islam or death, what was asked of them was "Will you cut your hair"? Having your hair cut by the state was viewed as conversion to the state sponsored religion. Thousands of Sikhs willingly went to their deaths rather than have their hair cut. In one particularly gruesome case, some Sikhs chose to have their scalps removed entirely, rather than have a single hair cut. This case is remembered every day in our daily prayers as documented below:

Translation from "Sikhism: An Oecumenical Religion" by Sirdar Kapur Singh. Edited by Gurtej Singh. Chandigarh, Punjab: Institute of Sikh Studies, 1993

Chapter XI (Sikh Congregational Prayer)

...The Sikhs of both sexes, who courted martyrdom in the cause of Religion and underwent unspeakable tortures and sufferings of being dismembered alive, scalped alive, broken on wheels, sawed alive, and boiled alive, and those who made sacrifices in the service of the centers of the Sikh Religion, the *gurdwaras* [Sikh places of worship], but never wavered in their faith and remained steadfast in mind and spirit in the cause of Sikhism to the last hair on their body and to their last breath ...

While an individual's fervor in the observation of their faith may vary, the forced cutting of hair violates the mandated requirement for all Sikhs to keep uncut hair.