

**International Baccalaureate Diploma**

**Extended Essay**

**Title:** Afghan Hindus and Sikhs: Continuity and Change in the Diaspora

**Research Question:**

To what extent has the emergence of a diaspora been a force for cultural change in the Afghan Hindu and Sikh diaspora community in the West?

**Subject:** Social and Cultural Anthropology

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## Abstract

Whether it was due to conflict or in search of better opportunities, migrating populations have provided opportunities for culture to develop in unique ways. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent conflicts led to the emergence of an Afghan Hindu and Sikh diaspora as members of that community left the country to find safety in the West. This diaspora has experienced several changing trends in recent years. My goal in writing this paper was to explore how the culture of the Afghan Hindu and Sikh community has changed through the question: "To what extent has the emergence of a diaspora been a force for cultural change in the Afghan Hindu and Sikh diaspora community in the West?". I referenced different ethnographies conducted in the past that studied the Afghan diaspora, and conducted informal interviews with various knowledgeable community members to gather qualitative data and personal perspectives. I investigated the context of this diaspora and how immigration to other countries has affected language, identity, and the institutions of religion, marriage, and family in these Afghan Sikh and Hindu communities. I also examined the various factors that have influenced those changes. Moving in the midst of new culture added many more layers of complexity to an already multi-faceted communal identity. Diaspora has also changed the way religion and customs are practiced, as they pick up Western influences, and intermarriage with other communities has become more common. Furthermore, the mother tongue is being spoken much less by those in the second and third generation, and many fear it will become extinct in the near future. However, Sikhs have retained much more continuity than Hindus in regards to language, religious traditions, and marriage as a result of a much more close-knit community.

Word Count: 288

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## Afghan Hindus and Sikh: Continuity and Change in the Diaspora

### **Introduction**

Culture is one of the most powerful forces that shapes our worldview as humans. From our favorite music to our first words, it defines who we are as communities and individuals. Diaspora communities demonstrate a unique phenomenon of intercultural contact, and their cultures are in a state of perpetual evolution. This involves changes affected by several different factors, particularly inter-generational dynamics, family relations, religion, and geographic proximity among community members (Fischer, 2015).

Little anthropological work has been done on the Afghan diaspora, despite the fact that Afghanistan was the world's top source for refugees until last year ("UNHCR", 2014). Furthermore, there have not been any anthropological studies done that encompass Afghan Hindus and Sikhs living in Western countries, though there have been works on themes like identity on the general Afghan diaspora, which is primarily Muslim.<sup>1</sup> When searching for prior studies, the most relevant was an ethnography titled "Ways of Speaking in the Diaspora", by Chitra Venkatesh Akkoor (2011); however, this study focused on only Hindus in Germany.

This led me to formulate my research question: "To what extent has the emergence of a diaspora been a force for cultural change in the Afghan Hindu and Sikh diaspora community in the West?". Much of my information came from primary sources through informal phone or in-person interviews with my informants. Prior to the interview, I would write out topics of conversation and potential questions based on my interviewee's background, but let the conversation take its course. For example, I delegated religious questions to those involved with

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<sup>1</sup> One of these works is *Roots and Routes*, by Marije Braakman, which I have referenced in the section "Identity"

their local temples, allowing me to effectively utilize my interview time to focus on their expertise. All information was applicable; however, each individual could only answer my questions in the context of their personal experiences, so it is not necessarily representative of the entire community.

Though this topic holds global significance, it also resonates with me personally because I am part of this community, and many of my interviewees were family members.<sup>2</sup> As a result, both myself and my informants had inherent bias toward the subject matter, and I have included pieces of autoethnography producing an emic perspective. However, because I was not surrounded by this community growing up, I often had a more etic perspective to many experiences my interviewees described to me.

As I grew older, I always wanted to learn more about the community that defined my ethnic heritage—Afghan Hindus and Sikhs. Though my parents are from Afghanistan, I have trouble reconciling the fact that I am unfamiliar with the vast majority of “typical” Afghan culture; I do not speak *Dari*, celebrate holidays, or wear Afghan clothing. I was curious about the attitudes of other Afghan Hindus and Sikhs towards their culture. What defined their identity? What role did their culture play in their lives? The extended essay provided me with the perfect opportunity to explore these questions. It also allowed me to have a very rewarding experience gathering research and exchanging ideas with the academic community. For example, I was able to form a collegiate connection with intercultural communication scholar Chitra Akkoor, and discuss this topic to not only deepen my personal understanding, but also further the anthropological collection of knowledge on the subject.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix for a detailed description of interviews

## Historical Background

### Origins of Hinduism and Sikhism in Afghanistan

Though today Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic, it was once was home to a diverse range of religious groups, including Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Pagans (Wink, 2002). A dynasty of Hindu kings, the Kabul Shahis, ruled from the third to ninth century CE. They controlled provinces of Gandhara,<sup>3</sup> as well as the valley of Kabul, and some areas of modern-day Pakistan bordering these provinces (Wink, 2002). Several sculptures of Hindu deities dating back to that time period have also been found in various parts of Afghanistan, demonstrating evidence of Hindu presence (Brown, 1991). By 871 CE, Arab Muslims had succeeded in gaining control of Kabul, and the majority of the population converted to Islam over the next couple centuries (“Afghanistan: Islamic Conquest”, n.d.). However, some pockets of Hindus and other minorities remained, and continued to practice their religious traditions (Singh, 2011).

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, brought his message to Afghanistan in the 15th century, and inspired some indigenous<sup>4</sup> Afghans to adopt Sikhism. Despite being a small minority, these people continued to follow their beliefs and retain contact with their Gurus (Singh, 2011). For example, there are stories of Sikhs from Kabul who traveled all the way to India to come visit the fifth Guru in the 16th century. Later on, the 10th Guru also sent an official proclamation to the Sikhs of Kabul, conveying his approval and instructing them to follow his teachings (Singh, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> The modern city Kandahar is believed to be named after the ancient kingdom of Gandhara (Room, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> Afghans who had been living there prior to the Islamic conquests

### **Later Migrations**

During the 19th century, Hindus and Sikhs controlled many trade routes along the border of Afghanistan and modern-day Pakistan, as they played a prominent role in the import and export trade and financial market (McLeod, 1997). Due to bonds of language, culture, and religion, moving between these areas was not difficult, and some historians speculate that many resettled in present-day Afghanistan for economic reasons during this time (Ballard, 2011).

Later on, after the partition of India and Pakistan, Pakistan became very unstable for Hindus and Sikhs due to religious tensions, riots, and violence. Consequently, many in areas near Afghanistan, chose to move there rather than India due to its proximity. Historians suggest that choosing where to move may have also been influenced by the location of family ties. Furthermore, they were already fluent in Dari<sup>5</sup> and Hindko, allowing them to easily communicate in business and social contexts (Ballard, 2011).

### **Position in 20th and 21st Century**

Afghan Hindus and Sikhs prospered during the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both economically and politically. However, discrimination did occur at micro and macro levels, including bullying or attempts at conversion (N. Mata, 2015). This contributed to an underlying fear of oppression of the dominant Muslim population and pulled the minority community closer together, helping preserve language and culture (Akkoor, 2015).

After 1979, when the Soviets came to power, they continued to thrive, and were not persecuted for their religion by the secular government (Ballard, 2011). Though Kabul was

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<sup>5</sup> Dari is the dialect of Farsi (Persian) spoken in Afghanistan

relatively safe, violence was prevalent in other areas. Some Hindus and Sikhs began to leave the country, fearful of the future (N. Mata, 2015).

Unfortunately, by 1989 the Soviets lost power, and their retreat resulted in a power vacuum. Fighting broke out among Mujahideen groups, and consequent civil wars made the country very unsafe. In Kabul, thousands were killed, most of the city was ruined, and several Hindu and Sikh temples were also destroyed (Ballard, 2011). Secular rule was also over, decreasing governmental tolerance of religious minorities. Directly affected by political turmoil, the majority of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs left during the early nineties to insure their safety. Most who remained did so because they could not afford the perilous journey out of the country (N. Mata, 2015).

The 21st century brought not only a new millennium, but a new regime: the Taliban. Though the Taliban is known for its extremism, some Afghan Hindus and Sikhs report the situation actually improving for them. They were not forced to adhere to strict rules imposed on the Muslim population, and there was less open fighting in Kabul, making the city safer (N. Mata, 2015).

Presently, Afghan Hindus and Sikhs are dispersed throughout the world, with a meager population remaining in Afghanistan (Ballard, 2011). Those who remain still face challenges of living as minority in a land ravaged by war. Though overall safety has improved, concerns include cremating their dead, educating their children, and threats of conversion (Ballard, 2011).

It is estimated that 7,500 live in the US, primarily in New York (“Afghan Hindu Association”, n.d.), and a few thousand live in Canada, largely in Toronto (N. Mata, 2015). In Europe, about 12-13,000 live in London (Singh, 2015), 6,000 in various cities in Germany, and



smaller numbers in other areas (“Herzlichen Willkommen”, n.d.). In Asia, it is estimated that 50,000 live in India (“Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees”, 2014), and some are scattered throughout other locations<sup>6</sup> (Singh, 2015).<sup>7</sup>

## **Identity**

### **Background**

The labels Afghan Hindu and Afghan Sikh distinguish the community from their Indian counterparts and from Afghan Muslims (Akkoor, 2015). The community is separated further into distinct subgroups: people often identify as “Kabuli”, “Kandhari”, “Sindhi”, “Khosti” or “Gardezi” based on where their family originated from<sup>8</sup> (Singh, 2015). However, the diaspora has added several layers of complexity, as many children now identify as American, Canadian, or German because of their birthplace.

### **Generational Differences**

Those who left Afghanistan at a young age or were born in the diaspora have a more difficult time navigating notions of identity and homeland because “they face pressure from home but also pressure to conform to mainstream culture” (Akkoor, 2015). They have no memory of their ethnic homeland, and cannot even visit. They are obligated to identify as “Afghan”, but have only experienced Afghan culture in the context of their Western environment (Braakman, 2005).

For those who have memories of Afghanistan, time in their new environment has changed them and their identity. For example, Naveen Mata describes how when he initially

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<sup>6</sup> Other locations include the Netherlands, Belgium, Dubai, and Russia

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that many of these figures are estimates from community members and temples, since there has not been any official census.

<sup>8</sup> In the case of Kabulis, Kandharis, and Sindhis, the same word is used to refer to the dialect they speak.

came to America, “I used to think of Afghanistan everyday, and even had plans of going back” (N. Mata, 2015). However, now after 28 years, it is just not as pertinent in his daily life (N. Mata, 2015). Akkoo describes a similar phenomenon of acculturation in Germany: “For those who came in their late teens, twenties, and thirties, their identity was already formed. They identify more as Afghan Hindu and have pride about it but they also adapt to Germany, learn the language, have good jobs” (Akkoo, 2015).

### **Implications of 9/11**

After 9/11, many began to alter how they presented their ethnic heritage, or at least became much more conscious when using the label “Afghan”. Being distinguished as non-Muslims became more significant to distance themselves from any association with Islamic extremism, especially in New York. This may be particularly important for turban-wearing Sikhs due to the erroneous, yet common assumption they are Muslim. Sonya Khanija recounts how her mother discouraged her from mentioning her Afghan heritage, but when asked, she still responds with “Afghan” because “that’s where I was born; we didn’t do anything wrong” (Khanija, 2015). However, she has friends who are very reluctant to identify as Afghan, saying, “they think people frown upon it because it’s a Muslim country” (Khanija, 2015). Akkoo describes how those in Germany identified themselves as “Afghan Hindus” to clarify that they were not Indian and emphasize that they were not Muslim (Akkoo, 2011).

On the other hand, 9/11 may also have had some positive implications. Before “most people didn’t know where [Afghanistan] was”, but now there is more awareness due to media coverage, although there are still several stereotypes associated with it” (Khanija, 2015).

### Language

Afghan Hindus and Sikhs can be divided into four primary linguistic groups: Kabuli, Kandhari, Sindhi, and Pashto<sup>9</sup>. These groups can also be distinguished by their geographic origin: Kabulis come from Kabul, Kandharis and Sindhis from Kandahar, and Pashto-speaking people from the Eastern provinces (Singh, 2015).<sup>10</sup>

When analyzing cultural trends in the context of language, fear of language loss was the most outstanding theme addressed by my interview subjects. Many in the first generation believe their mother tongues are being spoken less and less by their children and grandchildren, and are afraid their language may die out completely in the near future (A. Mata, 2015). This fear is more prominent among the Kandhari population, among Hindus rather than Sikhs, and among smaller populations (Singh, 2015). Kabuli Sikhs in the UK feel strongly that their language is nowhere near any danger of extinction. Most of the second generation is fluent in Kabuli, and it is spoken in many homes, although not usually amongst the children themselves (Singh, 2015).<sup>11</sup>

Some attribute this to intermarriage with other linguistic communities, after which communication in the family rarely occurs in an Afghan Hindu/Sikh mother tongue. For example, when an Afghan Hindu marries an Indian, children have more exposure to Hindi or English, as that is usually spoken in the home (Kamal Gawri, 2015). However, even when both of the parents are Afghan Hindu/Sikh, it is unclear whether children growing up today will speak their mother tongue fluently. This is generally attributed to environmental factors; at school, in public, and even amongst themselves, they likely communicate in English or German (Khanjia,

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<sup>9</sup> These terms are native taxonomy. Kabuli is considered a dialect of Hindko while Kandhari is considered a dialect of Saraiki. (N. Mata, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> These people primarily come from concentrated areas in Khost Province or Jalalabad (Singh, 2015)

<sup>11</sup> Further research would have to be done to see if the Sindhi and Pashto population experience these challenges. My interview subjects speculate that the situation for Sindhis would be similar to Kandharis.

2015). Therefore, their mother tongue is primarily spoken with their grandparents and possibly their parents. If at a young age, they are already accustomed to speaking in a certain language the majority of the time, it is doubtful they will switch to their mother tongue later on (Khanija, 2015).

### **Religion and Customs**

In Afghanistan, both Afghan Hindus and Sikhs were quite small minority communities. They grew very close-knit, resulting in a spectrum of beliefs rather than two distinct groups. Some may identify as either Hindu or Sikh, whereas others identify as both (N. Mata, 2015).

The ways people practice their religion are often heavily influenced by where they practice them: their places of worship. Religious practices of Afghan Hindus rely heavily the type of temple they attend. For example, in Germany, where they have their own temple and almost all attendees are Afghan Hindu, there is more continuity in Afghan practices. However, in New York, they have their own temple, but the local Indian community also attends. In other North American cities, there is no Afghan-specific Hindu temple, so most attend an Indian temple of their choice. As integration with Indian populations increases, so does Indian influence on traditions, rituals, and holidays (N. Mata, 2015).

On the other hand, the only main feature that distinguishes Afghan Sikh gurdwaras in the diaspora from their non-Afghan counterparts is that many attending their services are Afghan Sikhs. Due to this continuity and their large population, Sikhs have retained most religious practices (Singh, 2015).

Some customs simply cannot be practiced in the same manner due to restraints imposed by the new cultural environment of the diaspora. For example, *Lohri* was a Hindu holiday

celebrated with fireworks and bonfires outside homes, but this public festivity is clearly no longer possible due to legal restrictions (N. Mata, 2015). Yet another side effect of the change in environment was the shift in living arrangements from expanded to nuclear family.<sup>12</sup> Many, particularly those in the first generation, feel that the sense of “community”, especially during holidays, has diminished significantly as a result. In Afghanistan, many would live with an expanded family all under one roof, with women primarily responsible for passing on religious customs (P. Mata, 2015). A larger household made the celebration of holidays a much more communal affair, in which women would often come together on holidays to sew new clothes, decorate the house, and cook special dishes. Since their society was virilocal, after marriage the daughter-in-law would join the husband’s household. The mother-in-law would then be responsible for passing on religious customs and traditions, as each family had their own variation (P. Mata, 2015).

The dispersal of expanded family households has weakened the distinct structure for passing on traditions. Recently married women may no longer feel obligated to follow their mother-in-laws customs, and more often end up following a mixture of the traditions from their family of orientation and procreation. Some traditions, especially complex ones, are often omitted completely. Furthermore, practical concerns may impede celebration of holidays, as most usually work and many live in small communities where an elaborate celebration is not possible (P. Mata, 2015).

Perhaps an even more prominent factor in the evolution of traditions is indifference to maintaining them. My interviewees felt the overall culture of the West promotes questioning

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<sup>12</sup> More depth has been explained in the section “Family and Community”.

customs rather than just accepting them. For example, it was common in Afghanistan for Hindus not to eat meat on specific days of the week. Yet those growing up in the diaspora have difficulty following this without clear reasoning (Khanija, 2015). When children ask “why?”, parents often don’t have the answers, as they never asked the same questions. As a result, many children either follow customs simply for the sake of appeasing their parents, or do not follow them at all. Therefore, it is doubtful children will continue practicing certain rituals after there is no longer any pressure from older generations (A. Mata, 2015).

### **Family and Community**

Family is arguably the most important cultural institution in Afghan culture (Fischer, 2013). There, expanded families usually lived together, with parents, sons, and sons’ families under one roof. In Kandahar, the entire Hindu/Sikh community lived in their own quarters, known as *Shikarpuri Bazaar* and *Kabuli Bazaar*, and more extended relatives lived in very close proximity. With the emergence of a diaspora, all of this began to change very rapidly (A. Mata, 2015).

Many families were separated because they desperately left the country as refugees. It was often safer and more economical to travel in smaller groups, resulting in stepwise migration in some cases. For example, if a family had several children, they might send one or two at a time, to insure they could all leave safely (Fischer, 2013). Upon arriving in the diaspora, neolocality emerged as the norm. Today, most live exclusively with their nuclear family, although some may also live with their elderly parents, and community is distributed across the globe (N. Mata, 2015).

This dispersion impacted and changed several aspects of the community's culture. Akkoo's interview subjects frequently described this scattering: "Yes we are scattered, like a broken string of pearls...we were so together...even when sons got married and had children of their own. There was love among people...That is lost" (Akkoo, 2011). With less contact with grandparents and first-generation migrants, young children have much less exposure to their community's mother tongue. However, community still remains intact in some ways; for example, temples not only serve as a place of worship but a place for community, particularly in Germany (Akkoo, 2011).

### **Intermarriage**

In Afghanistan, most were expected to marry within very specific subgroups in their community. Over time, intermarriage has become increasingly common, and these boundaries have expanded further to include different linguistic, ethnic, religious, and racial groups. The extent to which a potential spouse is considered "non-traditional" also depends on how conservative the family is and the parents' personal preferences and views (Akkoo, 2015). With the majority of Afghan Sikhs living in London, the vast majority choose to marry within their community, so the following section is only pertinent to Hindus (Singh, 2015).

Marriages with the North Indian<sup>13</sup> Hindu community have increased in areas of the North American diaspora<sup>14</sup> where there are significant Indian populations. Second-generation Afghan Hindus are able to easily form connections with second-generation Indians, with commonalities in religion, language, and South Asian heritage (Akkoo, 2015). Due to these similarities, this is not seen as a concern by the first generation. The primary difference is mother tongue, but this is

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<sup>13</sup> Though North India includes several states, marriages have primarily been with Punjabis and some Gujratis

<sup>14</sup> Not as common in UK (more Afghan Sikhs) or German diaspora (no significant Indian diaspora) (N. Mata, 2015)

relatively inconsequential, as most Afghan Hindus and North Indians are fluent in Hindi as well as English (N. Mata, 2015).

Marriages with the Muslim community have also received attention in the community not due to their frequency but rather because they are considered a transgression of societal boundaries. In Afghanistan, marriage with a Muslim was seen as disregarding one's own community, and as a loss of culture for future generations because of the prominent fear of conversion (Akkoor, 2011). Though there was fear of oppression in Afghanistan, it served as a means to protect culture and traditions. However, the more pluralistic Western society is not perceived as threat, and thereby insinuates a deeper fear of irreversible loss of culture (Akkoor, 2015).

Although many may see intermarriage as an agent of cultural change, the extent of its role is debatable. For example, one concern of the first generation is that if a child marries outside the community, their future children will be oblivious to language, religion, or culture. However, it is unclear whether this can be attributed to intermarriage, or is just another effect of living in the diasporic environment (Akkoor, 2015). For example, in several cases, even if both parents are Afghan Hindu or Sikh, the child does not necessarily speak the language or practice religious customs (Khanija, 2015). Parents often attempt to speak specifically in their mother tongue, yet children form the habit of responding in English. Furthermore, even if both parents are Hindu, for example, that does not necessarily mean they are aware of the significance behind religious festivals or rituals, and therefore, are less likely to pass those on to their children (Khanija, 2015).



### **Conclusion**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan not only was the beginning of an era of political turmoil for the nation, but also led to the emergence of an Afghan Hindu and Sikh diaspora as members of that community left the country to find safety in the West. The emergence of an Afghan Hindu and Sikh diaspora community in the West created several new external factors that act as agents of cultural change. One has been the dissolution of outside pressure to retain culture. In Afghanistan, the fear of conversion to Islam and loss of culture provided a framework that pulled the community closer together to protect traditions and language. However, this fear of conversion has not been socially reproduced in the diaspora, as secular Western society is not perceived as an overt threat to religion and culture.

Furthermore, notions of home and identity have become more complex as migrants adapt to the diaspora and the second generation navigates various cultural influences in their lives. Some have also begun to marry outside their community. Though Hindu spouses are generally accepted, there has been a more adverse reaction to the few Muslim spouses due to this same fear of cultural oppression.

The diaspora has also contributed to a dispersion of community. Expanded families no longer live in the same home, and communities are now spread throughout the world, rather than concentrated in a few Afghan cities. This has significantly decreased contact between the first and second generation and overall community. As a result, children have less exposure to language and religious customs, there is less cohesion within the community. At this point, it appears to many Afghan Hindus that the extinction of their mother tongue is inevitable, and that within the span of a couple generations, it will be obsolete.

One concern of many anthropologists is the alarming rate at which languages are going extinct (“Endangered languages”, n.d.). Both Afghan Hindus and Sikhs from Kabul and Kandahar speak very unique dialects. Unfortunately, preserving mother tongues in small communities has become a “losing battle” as generations speak it less fluently and frequently, making it valuable to explore how cultural attitudes towards language continue to change (Akkoor, 2015).

It is interesting to note, however, that Sikhs seem to retain much more continuity in relation to Hindus in language, religious traditions, and marriage. This is likely due to several factors. Most Afghan Sikhs are concentrated in London, where they have a very close-knit community. Furthermore, while customs practiced by Afghan Hindus vary greatly by family, Afghan Sikh traditions are actually not very different from their non-Afghan Sikh counterparts. This may make it easier for children to identify with their roots when they have a more distinct culture and physical identity, especially in relation to Hindus.

Though I gathered a variety of qualitative data about this community through personal interviews, there are many areas of research that remain unexplored. The range of my interviews were very limited to my contacts. However, further research could include a large-scale survey, something I did not have the resources or authority to conduct at this time. This could provide more quantitative data on populations from a much larger and more representative sample size. Furthermore, I was not able to interview many in what I classified as the first generation, or any minors growing up in the diaspora.

Another area of study would be a comparison of different subgroups of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in more depth to examine if there are any underlying distinctions in trends. More

research could be done on Pashto and Sindhi-speaking people, as I was unable to interview anyone from that linguistic community. It would also be interesting to do a comparative study of the diaspora of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in the West and India to explore to what extent their subcultures have evolved differently.

Culture is perhaps one of the most diverse representations of the human race, and the emergence of diaspora communities has expanded that complexity by contributing to an environment of continually changing trends. This phenomenon has not only allowed for unique cultural exchange and diffusion, but has also perpetuated the loss of cultural traditions and language which is only expected to continue in the future.

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