

# **Diwali Downunder: Transforming and Performing Indian Tradition in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

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### **Introduction**

New Zealand's Indian community has established itself as a culturally vibrant group. It has grown into an integral part of New Zealand society, becoming the second largest Asian ethnicity after the Chinese, and the country's third largest minority. Many traditions that were brought to New Zealand from South Asia and its diaspora have been maintained since the first settlement in the nineteenth century, especially within community organisations. Such groups have provided the space and place to help create and reproduce cultural identity through the performance of traditional cultural activities such as music and dance. It is activities such as these that are important and particularly striking aspects of the festival called Diwali (Festival of Lights) in its transformed and public New Zealand context.

In New Zealand, Diwali has now moved from the relatively private sphere of ritual and performance within the Indian community to a public display and outward celebration. The festival has been held annually in distinct public spaces since 2002, with tens of thousands of people attending the event in Auckland and Wellington each year. Diwali maintains support not only from various Indian community groups, but is now a major public festival receiving generous assistance from a partly government-funded organisation, two city councils, and from corporate, community and private sponsors. Diwali in New Zealand has been transformed from a local religious and cultural festival celebrated by one broad community, to an event that has become a mainstream public expression of Indian or South Asian identity.

This paper examines the recontextualisation and transformation of Diwali in New Zealand with particular emphasis on performance. The study explores the role that various organisations have had in establishing this transformation, and the ways in which performances at Diwali events are expressions of self-identity and part of a process of place-making. Identity and place are constructed for and across different spheres of participation and involvement: for performers and audience and for Indian and non-Indian. It shows how traditions are transformed over time and place; how the intervention of organisations can help in a recontextualisation of a sacred event; and how migrants, old and new, perform culture to an Indian and non-Indian community as a result of such transformations.

The Indian Diwali festival (Festival of Lights) is celebrated among Indian communities the world over. With recognised Hindu roots in India, where it has slightly various forms depending on its context in this huge multicultural nation, the festival is now particularly visible among diaspora Indian (or South Asian) communities (either established or new). Here it is often a spectacle of display or a contact zone (Clifford 1997: 218) based around the celebration of cultural tradition and the meeting of cultures. For diaspora Indian communities the festival occupies a sometimes ambiguous or contentious place in terms of its dialectical positioning within or between public and private spheres. Both a distinct absence or overtly public display can say much about the context under study, especially relating to ideas of the quality of culture and equality of life for members of minority communities.

In its diaspora context, Diwali occupies a somewhat ambivalent position. India as a homeland is frequently foregrounded and situated within a culturally performed setting that is simultaneously based around a celebration of cultural identity and a negotiation between sacred and secular, Indian and non-Indian, traditional and

contemporary (or old and new), public and private, classical and popular, and even between intra-Indian subcultures. Such communities, or at least people who identify with an identity based around this cultural heritage or ethnicity – so often referred to as minorities, subaltern or diaspora – provide a recontextualised setting for Diwali that creates and celebrates culture and identity in the diaspora context.

New Zealand today pays particular attention to its postcolonial cultural makeup. In recent years, especially with increased Asian migration, New Zealand has depicted itself as an immigrant nation (a nation made up of immigrants and still welcoming immigrants). In terms of multicultural New Zealand, government departments such as the Office of Ethnic Affairs do much to place the ethnicity of New Zealand's mainly non-Māori and non-Pakeha in a public sphere of identity construction and negotiation. The Office deals mainly with migrants, refugees, long-term settlers and descendants of early settlers; ethnic communities; government agencies and local authorities; voluntary and community organisations and service providers; multicultural centres; and migrant and refugee centres. With a ministerial portfolio for ethnic affairs created by the government in December 1999, the Office of Ethnic Affairs was launched in May 2001. In this cultural milieu, Asia, to use a broad, culturally identifying definition of the term, is political. Asia is part of New Zealand.

This paper explores and problematises the recontextualization and transformation of the Indian Diwali festival in the New Zealand context (figs. 1-4). The research investigates the significance of a religious festival as a cultural performance and its place today as a public event that is consumed by a wider New Zealand public.<sup>5</sup> The study looks at the role that the various organisations have had in establishing this transformation, and explores performance within the festival as part of identity construction and place-making. The article draws from several sources in its theoretical orientation. The study of media among the South Asian diaspora has been particularly influential. For example, Ray's work on Bollywood among Fijian Indians in Australia helps in understanding the disjunctions within migrant communities. Likewise, Mishra's work on Bombay cinema and diasporic desire (Mishra 2002) reiterates the importance of looking at Bollywood on a global level within its diasporic contexts. Focussing mainly on explaining the performance aspects associated with Diwali in its New Zealand context, the research herein was initiated as a music ethnography or musical anthropology (Seeger 1992) that links music performance with ideas of place and identity (Stokes 1994). Of particular importance in this field is the connection between music performance and place-making. As Solomon points out, "musical performance as a practice for constructing identity is now an ethnomusicological commonplace. That it can also be a practice for constructing *place* may not seem so obvious at first" (2000: 257-58). Concepts of place and space have long been a focus of human geography, and this paper looks at ways in which cultural performance at Diwali events in multicultural New Zealand embody a sense of identity and place-making. Identity and place are constructed for and across different spheres of participation and involvement: for performers and audience, and for Indian and non-Indian. While there are many micromusics in New Zealand, this paper has particular significance in the study of contemporary culture in that it helps show how traditions are transformed over time and place; how the intervention of organisations can help in a recontextualisation of a sacred event; and how migrants, old and new, perform culture to an Indian and non-Indian community as a result of such transformations.

Following an outline of the history of the Indian diaspora in New Zealand, the main part of this study investigates the Diwali festival, in particular its contemporary place

in New Zealand as a public event in the cities of Auckland and Wellington. The discussion divides into three sections: (re)contextualising tradition; transforming tradition; and performing South Asia. In order to understand Diwali in broader terms it is important to see how the festival is perceived in India as well as in New Zealand today. In connection with its transformation in the New Zealand context, the study looks at the festival's wider impact, especially in terms of creating culture and constructing cultural identity. The Indian diaspora has a place that is both constructed and contested in historical and contemporary New Zealand, and festivals such as Diwali help migrants – old and new – facilitate their own cultural imagination. The festival also has a wider purpose as an event that helps cultural understanding and celebration.

### **India in New Zealand**

It was about a decade ago that Leckie stated that “South Asian communities in New Zealand rarely attract much attention from the media” (Leckie 1995: 133). By 2002, however, and primarily with the promotion of public Diwali festivals in Auckland and Wellington with the help of the Asia 2000 Foundation of New Zealand (Asia 2000), the situation had noticeably changed. While attitudes towards New Zealand’s Indian or South Asian diaspora have certainly changed over time, the Indian community has now established itself as one of the most outwardly recognisable and vibrant migrant groups. In New Zealand, the Indian diaspora dates from the nineteenth century, and since that time has grown into an integral part of New Zealand society, becoming the second largest ethnicity within the Asian community after the Chinese, and the country's third largest minority. The national census of 2001 showed that the Indian population was 61,803 (around double the 1991 figure), with 17,550 being born in New Zealand. While Indian migration to New Zealand has a history from the nineteenth century, with the relaxing of the immigration laws since 1987 a wave of new Indian and South Asian migrants have made New Zealand their home. Of those resident in New Zealand who identified themselves as Asian, and who account for 6.6 percent of the total population (or 237,459 people), 26 percent of those belonged to the Indian community (Statistics New Zealand). Indian New Zealanders also had the highest level of involvement in the labour force out of all the Asian groups sampled in the census – 77 percent. These statistics help illustrate the Indian community as a well-established part of New Zealand society.

In an attempt to promote Indian cultural identity, the 1950s saw the establishment of several centres for social and cultural activities. For example, in Auckland, a community centre that served as the main meeting place for all the Auckland Indian Association activities was built in 1955. Named after Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), the Gandhi Hall was the site for language classes, religious ceremonies, weddings and traditional festivals until new Hindu temples were built in Auckland from the 1980s. In Wellington, the Bharat Bhavan (Indian Hall) was built in 1956 and has been the site for such activities for the Wellington Indian community. The Sikh community in New Zealand has always been closely associated with the Indian Central Association, providing the majority of the membership of the Country Section of the Association through their involvement in dairy farming, but they also operate their own New Zealand Sikh Society. While Sikhs form a co-operative group within the larger Indian community, they are a strong and distinctive cultural group within New Zealand.

### **Diwali (Festival of Lights)**

Derived from the Sanskrit word *deepawali* ('row of lights'), Diwali, or the Hindu New Year, is one of the most widely practised festivals in the Hindu calendar. Diwali is not only celebrated by the majority Hindu population in India, but also by many

other South Asians and its diaspora the world over. The festival, which has slight variations across South Asia according to cultural background, is based around the lunar cycle, which means the festival falls on a different date every year (either October or November). The festival is celebrated in the latter half of the lunar month, from the full moon until the appearance of the new moon, and marks the end of the year and the beginning of the Hindu New Year.

The main purpose of the Hindu festival is to honour the god Vishnu and his wife, the goddess Lakshmi, who is the goddess of light, good fortune and prosperity. The major theme that runs throughout the traditional five-day festival, as it is typically held in India, is the celebration of good over evil and the wish for prosperity in the coming year. Hindus believe that Vishnu preserves and protects the world with his goodness, and symbolizes the pure thoughts and deeds that all Hindus should aim for. The different days of the festival are associated with different stories and legends showing these attributes. The first day sees the lighting of a single lamp in front of homes or businesses. This is an offering to the Hindu god of death, Yama, to remind everyone that death is a part of life and also to welcome Lakshmi. The lighting of multiple lamps and the hanging of bright street lights continues throughout the festival to provide a festive atmosphere and to symbolize the power of good over evil.

### **(Re)Contextualising Tradition**

The various associations of South Asian communities throughout New Zealand form a social network and organizational framework that promotes a perceived cultural unity or identity within and across each group. An important part of this theme is the celebration of cultural traditions. While the Indian Association is officially a secular group, its members and some Indian community organisations around the country actively celebrate Diwali. Key informants from such organisations have mentioned their involvement in putting on Diwali functions for the local Indian community for many years, and one of the more recent influences noted at accompanying performances was Bollywood (Indian cinema) dancing. Religious and cultural events (traditional and contemporary) that are celebrated in India and have been transplanted to New Zealand are used as the focus for the celebration of cultural or broader Indian identity. In 2003, for example, major Indian festivals celebrated in Wellington from September to mid-November by the Wellington Hindu Association were:

Nadesar Abishekam	9 September
Puraddasi Sani (Start)	20 September
Navarathiri Viratham (Start)	26 September
Saraswathi Pooja	4 October
Vijaya Thasami /Maanambu	5 October
Nadesar Abishekam	8 October
Puraddathi Sani	11 October
Deepavali (Diwali)	24 October
Kanda Sashti Viratham (Start)	26 October
Sooran Por	30 October
Thirukkalyanam	31 October
Soama Varam	17 November

(New Zealand Hindu Association 2003.)

South Asian community groups provide both the space and place to help create and reproduce cultural identity through the performance of traditional cultural activities such as music, song and dance. It is activities such as these that are usually important parts of Diwali for the community groups.

As well as the obvious geographic differences between northern and southern hemispheres in terms of the time of year that Diwali is held, in the New Zealand context the festival has distinct meanings for those who celebrate it in its recontextualised setting. Many members of the South Asian community take part in Diwali, while some religious festivals that are important to particular groups are celebrated only within those communities. Within these groups, Diwali in its New Zealand setting usually lasts for one night instead of the traditional five. In private homes, however, families might still follow the five days of celebration, but the public functions (outside the home and involving members of the community) usually consist of celebrations that include cultural performances by local amateur performers (Kasanji 1980: 233).

Before 2002, Diwali was still beginning to make more of a public appearance in New Zealand. For example, Anderson provided a preview of the event in a local Wellington community newspaper, *Cook Strait News*. Here, it was noted that the Wellington Indian Association would hold a bazaar on 13 October 2001, which would include an array of stalls. The bazaar was part of the lead up to two major celebrations, Navratri and Diwali, which would be celebrated on 17 October and 10 November respectively. The latter event included a concert. Data collected from South Asian community groups from various parts of New Zealand confirm the importance of the performing arts in not only Diwali, but also for many other celebrations that such groups help promote for its members. From traditional music and dance to the more recent influences of Bollywood and bhangra (that is, pan-Indian popular music), which are now especially influential among younger members of the community, the context of Diwali, or at least its recontextualised setting in New Zealand, provides a location that celebrates tradition, creates culture and reinforces a sense of identity and place within and across local, regional and national boundaries for those present.

### **Transforming Tradition**

In 2002, Diwali in New Zealand was transformed into two large public events. From this time two events have included the involvement of Asia 2000 and the city councils of Auckland and Wellington. After the successes of the Chinese Lantern Festival held in Auckland since 1999, Asia 2000 decided to organize Diwali festivals in both Auckland and Wellington. In October 2002, many New Zealanders attended the two celebrations, which included performers from the local Indian communities participating in both traditional and contemporary Indian music and dance, as well as a group of traditional dancers brought especially to New Zealand from India (Asia 2000: 12). The Diwali celebrations in 2003 and 2004 followed a similar pattern of local and international performers.

In 2002, Asia 2000 held events in Wellington beginning on 19 October and finishing in Auckland on 26 October. An estimated 70,000 people attended the festivals (Barton). For these inaugural events, Asia 2000 received sponsorship locally and from overseas: decorations were provided by the Hindu Endowment Board in Singapore, and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in Delhi provided the Nagaland Performing Group and a rod-and-string puppet troupe from Karnataka. Asia 2000 sponsored a rangoli maker from Gujarat, Abhay Gadkari, to come to the festival. Workshops were held at Te Papa in Wellington and at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, with a project for schools a major part of the event. The now annual event is well advertised and reported in local and community media. There is mass advertising, posters, fliers, banners and website information.

The festival as a large-scale public event has an array of attractions, including ritual and entertainment. It is interesting to note several of the aims of the festival: establishing an annual festival that will be visually exciting, culturally authentic and a leading event for Auckland and Wellington; raising public awareness of traditional Indian culture, of the contribution made by the Indian communities, and of their long history in New Zealand; engaging children and families across the two cities in all aspects of the Festival; establishing a firm positioning for all Festival partners and sponsors as supportive of diverse communities. and working closely with all partners to maximise exposure for the event and benefits to sponsors.

In 2003, a souvenir brochure of the Diwali events was published by Asia 2000 and Auckland City. The brochure included a colourful collection of images to accompany the events, providing letters of support from key figures, background information on the festival, travel details to India, acknowledgement of sponsors, as well as a list of recipes. The cover image depicts the goddess of light, good fortune and prosperity, Lakshmi, in the centre; Sarasvati to the left, who is the goddess of wisdom, the arts and knowledge (she is shown playing the vina, or lute); and Ganesha, who has an elephant's head and large human body (as a god of wisdom he is often shown at the beginning of books). Letters of support for the festival are shown on full A4 pages from Dame Silvia Cartwright (Governor-General), Bal Anand (High Commissioner of India), Helen Clark (Prime Minister), Anand Satyanand (Deputy Chairman, Asia 2000 Foundation), John Banks (Mayor, Auckland City), Prithpal Singh (President, New Zealand Central Indian Association), Christopher Butler (Executive Director, Asia 2000 Foundation), Pansy Wong (MP), and Ashraf Choudhary (MP).

In 2003, Asia 2000's Diwali celebrations were held in Auckland at the Auckland Indian Association's Mahatma Gandhi Centre, and the following weekend in Wellington. About 50,000 people attended the Auckland celebrations and around 35,000 the Wellington event. The latter was held on a Saturday afternoon and spread around three main venues: the main Town Hall stage, the outside Civic Square stage and a smaller concert hall off the Town Hall. Arranged throughout the venues were stalls operated by various community groups and private traders selling food and drink, Indian music and movies, fabric and other Indian arts and crafts. The community groups present included the Indian Association, the Hindu Association, sports groups and other community groups such as the Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil and Sri Lankan groups. These groups used the event to raise funds for their respective organizations. There were also stalls from the Indian Tourism department and private travel companies promoting India as a travel destination. The event was opened by Dame Silvia Cartwright in the Town Hall, who lit a traditional diva lamp, accompanied by speeches from community leaders such as the chairman of the Central Indian Association as well as politicians. The opening ceremony was mainly attended by members of the Indian community, although within a couple of hours the crowd consisted mostly of non-Indians.

Festivals such as Diwali have now moved from the relatively private sphere of ritual, sacred performance within the Indian community to a public and mostly secular display in its New Zealand context. With tens of thousands of people attending the festivities each year in Auckland and Wellington, Diwali in New Zealand has been transformed from a small religious festival to a mainstream expression of South Asian (mainly Indian) culture. The festival has been transformed in its diasporic context and might be viewed as creating culture and a new type of tradition in New Zealand. As a site of cultural meaning, Diwali in its public context now has significance for many New Zealanders, Asian and non-Asian alike.

## **Performing South Asia**

Performance is often an integral part to many public Indian cultural events such as Diwali. An ethnography of performance in Diwali on an initial descriptive level shows that the transformed tradition is one that deviates significantly from local community and private celebrations. Seeger provides a useful way of proceeding with a “do-it-yourself ethnography” of performance with “who” “where” “when” “what” “how,” and “why” questions for helping to understand such an event. The Asia 2000 Diwali events in Auckland and Wellington differ considerably from local community events in terms of who performs. Unlike local celebrations that showcase the talents of amateur community performers, the public events include two broad categories of performers: those from overseas and those from within New Zealand. The performers at these events come from diverse South Asian backgrounds; they have different levels of ability; and they are of mixed ages and gender.

Diwali in New Zealand is performed in several ways, but in the performing arts it is music, dance and theatre that especially stand out. The public Diwali events in Auckland and Wellington include a mix of amateur community artists (that is, local) and professional performance acts (mainly overseas, but including some local). The celebrations consist almost entirely of performances by Indian or South Asian artists ranging from traditional South and North Indian classical music and dance to contemporary Bollywood and Indo/Euro fusion groups (Table 1). The variety of performers is quite striking: from beginners to advanced; from young to old; from amateur to professional; from local to national; and from national to international.

*Table 1  
Table of Events (Wellington 2003)*

Town Hall Stage	Civic Square Stage	Illoot Concert Chamber	Civic Suite
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2.45 Mudra Dance Company

3.00	Opening Ceremony Town Hall Auditorium		
3.30	Folk n Funky (Bhangra)	Moksha	
3.45	Panchnaad		
4.30	Wellington Telegu Association	Capital City Ramayan Mandali Wellington Malaysian Cultural Group	Rangoli competition
4.45	Coal Artam	Pushp Chand	
5.00	Tawa Twirlers	Hindu Association	Rangoli
5.15	Capital City Ramayan Mandali	Classical	judging
5.30		Wellington Telegu Association	
5.45	Panchnaad (repeat)	Wellington Telegu Association	Winner s announ ced
6.00		Tawa Twirlers	
6.15		Wellington Hindi School	
6.30	Fashion Show	Baalvikas and Shakti Vrund Sri Lankan Dance Academy	
6.45		Rattan Singh Shagufa Zia	
7.00			
7.15	Bollywood Competition		
7.30		Bharat Samaj	
8.15	Sri Lankan Dance Academy	DJ Woody	
8.30	Bollywood winners announced	Tu-faan Express DJ/s	
8.45	Break		

9.00		Bollywood Firedancers & Pyrotechnic display
9.15	Panchnaad (repeat)	
10.00	Bollywood reprise	
10.15	Closing and Thanks	
10.30	After party - Big Bada Boom at Indigo	
	MCs	MCs
3.00 -7:15	Shashi Jokhan	Raj Varma & Rina Patel
7:15	close Priya Singh	

The programme for the 2004 Wellington event, for example, mostly indicates genres rather than community or music styles. The programme mentions community acts, classical music demonstrations and lectures, DJs, henna painting, herbal remedies, Bollywood dancing competition and workshop, international bhangra group, animal puppets of India, storytelling, mask making, rangoli competition, and a fashion show. This latest event attracted about 35,000 people. The programme for the 2004 Auckland event, which was held at the Auckland Town Hall and outside on Queen Street, shows full details of performers and their allotted times. About 60,000 people attended this event.

#### **“Where and when is it happening?”**

The transformed and public events take place in the capital, Wellington, and in New Zealand’s most populous city, Auckland. The events are about one week apart in order to use some of the same performers within each. While private celebrations would normally follow the lunar calendar, community and public events tend to be held at weekends around the time of Diwali in order to try to attract as many people as possible. The public events sponsored by Asia 2000 even span several weeks in order to showcase the main international performers and some local artists firstly in one city, then in the other.

The Wellington event in 2003, for example, began early in the afternoon and lasted until late in the evening. As shown in Table 1, it was held across five contexts, which consisted of three main stages: Town Hall Stage, Civic Square Stage and the Ilot Concert Chamber. While the Civic Suite was reserved for rangoli, the Town Hall Foyer was used for the official yet semi-private blessing (or puja – prayer) before the opening ceremony. This context appears to have been strategically placed before the main public event and included VIPs.

#### **“What is being performed?”**

The transformed tradition in its public context includes a range of performance genres and styles, reflecting the diversity of cultural backgrounds of the performers and the communities they represent. One of the main non-New Zealand groups in 2003 was the five member classical and folk ensemble Panchnaad from Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, in north India. The ensemble, which includes sarod (lute), tabla (drums), harmonium, vocals, and kathak dancing, was established in 1982 by sarod player Vikash Maharaj. The group plays a mixture of classical and folk music and have performed widely on the international circuit in folk and world music festivals:

The eclectic makeup of Panchnaad’s performance act would perhaps make them more accessible to a wider audience, something that would be particularly important for those members of the audience who are unfamiliar with Indian music. Many local performers from the Wellington South Asian communities participated in the events,

which seemed to act as a showcase for local talent from a vast number of community and cultural groups.

### **"How and why is it being performed?"**

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the Wellington and Auckland performance events is the period of time allowed for the performers. In 2003, for example, while the international acts, including Panchnaad and Prasanta Bhanja, had a time slot of around forty-five minutes to one hour, which is particularly short for Indian music, the local performers were generally restrained to brief performances from between five and thirty minutes. In the public Diwali events, the international artists are presented as top-class acts for a New Zealand audience. The media hype that accompanies the festival does much to support the notion of professionalism. The international artists are brought to New Zealand to showcase top-quality aspects of Indian culture. The brevity of time allocated for many of the local acts reflects the amateur nature of most of these performers. Each performer presented themselves as an emblem of a part of South Asian culture or its diaspora, and of South Asian culture in general, their performances being celebrated in a context of cultural celebration and consumption.

### **"What is its effect on the performers and the audience?"**

In terms of New Zealand as an immigrant nation, Roscoe comments that "through song and dance these [immigrant] communities, quite literally, are able to perform their cultural identity" (Roscoe 1999: 120). Performance in the Diwali context is a complex web of significance where members of the Indian and South Asian communities have a sense of cultural empowerment and participation. A powerful element of performance is that it can so often be linked to ideas of place and space. At the public Diwali events a number of different styles or genres form part of the soundscape that helps create a sense of place for performers and audience alike. As Stokes notes, "the musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity" (Stokes 1994: 3). The events seem to portray a kind of pan-South Asian identity expressed simply as India through the medium of the festival, while at the same time expressing and celebrating cultural difference with an emphasis on social harmony in the New Zealand context. In terms of India as a real or imaged homeland, as Gupta and Ferguson comment, "remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 11). In New Zealand's multicultural context, identities are formed within and across cultural and national borders. In this context, migrant communities are able "to consistently generate powerful symbols of social alliance, tradition, heritage, place, love, hate, nationalism, and a host of other emotions" (Lornell and Rasmussen 1997: 19). What the recontextualised, transformed and public Diwali represents, however, is a complex picture where communities are embedded in a politics of difference. For the festival goers, they might gaze like tourists at an event and consume culture as yet another contemporary product that is the result of global flows. While referring to the world music scene, which overlaps with the music typically found in the public Diwali event, Mitchell talks of a "synthetic sonic experience of surface impacts" (Mitchell 1996: 85) and Mitsui of "domestic exoticism." That is, the music is something that might be exoticised by the non-Indian or non-informed audience within an Orientalist framework and put on display for cultural and multicultural consumption. Of course, travel in the contemporary world does not necessarily mean leaving home, and one can consume a cultural or ethnic "other" at home and abroad,

especially in a world that increasingly exoticises and commercialises the culture of many "others". As MacCannell (2001: 389) asks, why leave home at all? But a contemporary ethnoscapes in which tourism and/or travel are located draws attention to such public displays of culture consumption as found in Diwali, and one could view the event as a type of ethnic tourism that "is marketed to the public in terms of the 'quaint' customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples" (Smith 1989: 4). Whether or not the audience (South Asian or not) understood the performances from an insider's perspective, one of the main differences between the overtly public events and those of local organisations is that while each is part of a different process of community building the former is staged for mass culture consumption and the latter is presented for local community celebration.

#### **Conclusion**

Diwali is present the world over in many nations and cultural contexts. In New Zealand Diwali has emerged over the past three years in Auckland and Wellington as a media event with several functions specific to its local context, including the celebration of difference and the consumption of ethnicity. Such spectacles might be likened to what Hall refers to as a "cultural supermarket" (Hall 1992: 303), a place where one is "confronted by a range of different identities" (1992: 303) which are celebrated and even consumed like many other products. A study of Diwali in New Zealand helps portray culture creation and the construction of place, identity and community for many New Zealanders. The public festival with its emblems of Indian culture and tradition provides a means to attempt to understand how and why some communities give prominence to a real and sometimes imagined cultural home.

Diwali in New Zealand is increasingly moving from the private to the public, from the sacred to the secular, and is currently engaged in a type of core-periphery binary discourse between minority groups and centres of political power. It creates contexts with articulations of contestation and negotiation within and between different communities in New Zealand's newfound multicultural political milieu. The idea of place as a powerful emblem and as a nostalgic identity marker is evident on several spheres: community, region, national and transnational. Those celebrating Diwali in New Zealand, where it is perhaps detached from the mother country and therefore exaggerated in its presentation, contribute to the complexities of identity formation for not only themselves, but also for the people with whom they have chosen to share their culture.

This study of Diwali has surveyed its place in New Zealand today. The festival in its transformed public context, particularly with the help of national and local organisations, does much to support multicultural understanding through the celebration of culture and cultural difference. It also helps in place-making and the portrayal of diaspora communities living in perceived social harmony. But the South Asian community is large enough to be outwardly visible, unlike some smaller minorities who are perhaps inward-oriented with no public voice in broader New Zealand culture. Helping to create culture and keep the spirit of Diwali alive, the various divisions identified within the festival in its New Zealand public context, including classical/popular, public/private, sacred/secular, South Indian/North Indian, Indian/Indian diaspora, established New Zealander/recent New Zealander, and Asian/non-Asian, are each aspects that contribute to Diwali's unique place in contemporary New Zealand culture.

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### **Captions**

1. Dancers Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003 Photo by Robert Catto  
[www.catto.co.nz](http://www.catto.co.nz)
2. Dancer Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003 Photo by Robert Catto  
[www.catto.co.nz](http://www.catto.co.nz)
3. Festival goers Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003 Photo by Robert Catto  
[www.catto.co.nz](http://www.catto.co.nz)
4. Dancers Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003 Photo by Robert Catto  
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Dancers Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003  
Photo by Robert Catto [www.catto.co.nz](http://www.catto.co.nz)



**Dancer Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003**  
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Festival goers Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003 Photo by Robert Catto [www.catto.co.nz](http://www.catto.co.nz)



Dancers Diwali festival Wellington 18 October 2003 Photo by Robert Catto [www.catto.co.nz](http://www.catto.co.nz)