

From Demography to ‘Something’, and ‘Something’ to Something Else....: A Pakistani Graduate Student’s Experience in Norway

By Mashhood Ahmed Sheikh

After completing a Masters in Population Sciences (Demography) from University of the Punjabⁱ, and flirting with several art and design courses from National College of Arts (NCA), and College of Art & Design (University of the Punjab), Pakistan, I decided to pursue higher education in any high-income western country. My decision was primarily based on the assumption that the quality of education is superior in high income countries in the west. That assumption was soon to be tested in the northernmost university in the world. The MPhil in Visual Cultural Studies programⁱⁱ at the University of Tromsø, Norway, seemed like a good combination of social science and video production, so I came with an enormous motivation to learn a completely new research method, and subject.

The classes began with a focus on learning the technical aspects of filming and the theoretical aspects of Visual Anthropology. I soon realized that I had learned the technical aspects of filming much better in Pakistan, but the main issue I had to face was converting from being a demographer to being an anthropologist.

As a demographer, I was used to looking at the world in terms of empirical and concrete data. After taking several lectures related to anthropology, I soon made two initial conclusions: one) some of the teachers really need to pass an IELTS or TOEFL testⁱⁱⁱ, something which is required by every international student from a non-EU country for admission in Norway; two) what is this ‘something’ they talk about again and again?

Teachers used the word ‘something’ at least 20 times in a class to point to a ‘something’ concept, which does not have a specific name yet. I came to learn that anthropology is probably the branch of social science and humanities which tends to study culture at such depth, that no concepts can explain anything anymore, and all there is left is ‘something’, related to ‘something’. I was not the only one having these crises. Out of my 5 class fellows, only one had studied anthropology before; the rest had backgrounds as diverse as ‘English literature’, ‘Education’, ‘Sociology’, and even ‘Law’. One can imagine the quality and focus of discussions in a class with such diverse backgrounds.

In the second semester, here at the University of Tromsø, Norway, I decided to look for courses beyond my department. I consider myself very

fortunate to enroll myself in a ‘research methods’ course taught by Dr. Floyd Rudmin. Finally, I met a teacher in Norway, who actually loves his job, and is damn good at it. Apart from what he taught, he imparted the passion for research to me. It was probably then that I decided that I should still try to pursue another degree and continue learning different perspectives. Isn’t that what we look for in a teacher? Inspiration?

The overall experience of studying in Norway did not impress me at all. I thought that I could not take this anymore, and decided to apply to other degree programs elsewhere in the world for the next year. To my surprise, I even managed to get scholarship offers from the U.K. and a world-renowned institute in Thailand.

Meanwhile, here in Tromsø, Norway, luck was on my side, and I got Peter Crawford as my thesis supervisor. I decided that I should not leave things incomplete, and finish this degree instead. In some months, I had started to observe and analyze social situations, and look for ‘somethings’ to explain a culture myself. The teachers have succeeded in their task, and I could now analyze social life and culture in shades of grey as well (of course, black and white is best measured with numbers). I was glad that I continued to study in Tromsø, Norway, and did not leave for a different degree elsewhere.

A year and a half later, I embarked upon the same problem, and purposely wrote a thesis draft, full of theories, concepts and ‘something’s’. I am grateful to my supervisor, Peter Crawford, for making me realize in good time that I am making things much more complex than they are (apparently there was a limit, even in anthropology), and that I need to stay in touch with reality, or more appropriately, the data that I have collected during my field work. It was a like a *déjà vu*. I have become exactly what I hated about some of my lecturers in the first year.

Two years passed, and I finished the degree with flying colors (I still wonder how that happened). My film^{iv} got screened in more than a dozen festivals around the world, and I managed to draft several articles out of my thesis, one of which has already been published^v.

I have successfully finished the never-ending degree. I could now appreciate the importance and relevance of qualitative, image-based research, which took two years to learn and understand.

As was expected, the choice of studying Visual Cultural Studies was not a very practical one. We had a joke in the class that if someday we find a job vacancy asking for “visual anthropologists”, it must be a prank by one of our class fellows.

To secure the unlimited supply of junk food on my table, I enrolled myself in another Masters degree, specializing in quantitative research. I'm not done with Norway yet. The journey still goes on.....

ⁱ Masters in Population Sciences, Department of Population Sciences, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab. URL: <http://pu.edu.pk/program/show/900041/M.Sc-in-Population-Sciences-Self-Supporting->

ⁱⁱ http://en.uit.no/study-catalogue/show-program?p_document_id=269222

ⁱⁱⁱ Apparently, the second language at the department was French instead of English.

^{iv} Sheikh, Mashhood Ahmed. **Side effects: Portrait of a young artist in Lahore** (2009) 35 min, DVD, produced by Visual Cultural Studies, University of Tromsø, Norway. Distributed by Intervention Press, Denmark.

Film URL: <http://www.intervention.dk/indexip.htm>

^v Sheikh, Mashhood Ahmed. 2010. Religiosity and rebelliousness among young men in Lahore, Pakistan. (Journal Article) *Betwixt & Between* 2010. Pp 142- 157. *Betwixt & Between – Sosialantropologisk Forening* 2010. Oslo. BK Grafisk AS. ISSN: 1504-2618. ISBN: 978-82-90835-00-7.