

Royal Anthropological Institute First Annual Postgraduate Conference Report 20 September 2011 Department of Anthropology, Durham University

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“The RAI and Durham University are hosting research students in all sub-disciplines of anthropology at UK universities for the upcoming postgraduate conference at Durham University on 20 September 2011. As this will be the first postgraduate conference held by the RAI, it is the organisers’ hope that it will provide insight into the depth and breadth of anthropological research currently being conducted by postgraduates across the UK.”

I had the opportunity to attend the first postgraduate conference organised by the Royal Anthropological Institute. Although I have been a postgraduate fellow for few months now, I didn’t know any graduate members. At the same time, my affiliation with the Faculty of Music doesn’t always allow me much time to inform myself about recent anthropological graduate research outside Oxford. The conference, which took place at Durham University, aimed to offer an overview of anthropology in the UK. It was a positive experience and a fantastic opportunity for networking.

From all the delegates, only three were not able to attend - which was disappointing, I was looking forward to Debojyoti Das’ talk from SOAS on *Visual Anthropology and the Knowledge of the ‘Other’: Representing Colonial Subjects through Photography in Naga Hills* as I am very much interested in visual anthropology.

The conference was hosted by the Department of Anthropology at Durham University. From my experience so far, Durham specialises in medical anthropology and the majority of its students presented a relevant paper. Overall however, there were a few topics on medical anthropology, perhaps more than one would expect at the first postgraduate RAI conference, leaving the impression that social and cultural anthropology are underrepresented by British institutions.

Dr Bob Simpson, Head of Anthropology department at Durham, gave the opening lecture, introducing the audience to topics such as graduate life, transferrable skills in anthropology, but also writing and publishing in the social sciences; information particularly useful for inexperienced graduates. Shortly after Dr Simpson, Dr Stephen Lyon, Senior Lecturer at Durham praised anthropology as a discipline and discussed the need for de-Londonisation of RAI events.

Following the welcome talks, the audience had to choose between three options for every session. For my first morning session I attended Andrea Butcher’s (University of Aberdeen) presentation: *Grammatically Speaking: Religious Authority and Cultural Identity in Buddhist Ladakh*. Her paper was based on short ethnographic research in Ladakh, examining perceptions on local languages. I enjoyed the topic of her presentation, however, I noticed her material was not adequately organised, leaving parts of her presentation unstructured. Next, I chose Ivan Constantino’s (University of Oxford) *Tibetan Urbanism in Practice: Movements in Space from the Perspective of a Theory of Material Social Practices*, which summed up part of Ivan’s ethnographic research for his doctorate with a migrant community in Lhasa. Ivan’s delivery of his arguments was very coherent, well-structured and precise, using theory, methodology and part of his ethnographic material (such as pictures from the field). The final presentation of the morning session I opted for, was given by Muhammad Aurang Zeb Mughal (University of Durham), who was also one of the conference conveners, on *Day that Matters: Friday as a Weekday and Weekend in Pakistan*, discussing the shift of the “day off” from Friday (Muslim religion) to Sunday (Westernised, tradition of the commercial industry). Quite a confident speaker, Aurang gave an interesting presentation, but I felt that the ethnographic material was not well incorporated. What he succeeded in was to give an analysis of time and space through a combined anthropological and philosophical point of view.

After a short coffee break, the morning sessions continued and I quickly went to the Lab to hear Bowen Wei (University of Edinburgh) explaining the *Narrative Beside the Pitch: An Ethnography with*

Thebans, Edinburgh Gay Men RFC. Bowen focusses on Caledonian Thebans, Scotland's gay rugby club, mainly analysing gender roles in rugby. Here I would like to stress one of the negative aspects of the conference organisation: timing between presentations, questions, and the transitions to and from the three different lecture rooms; unfortunately there was not enough time allowed, resulting in leaving early from presentations to make it up to the other lecture rooms. In my case, I left early from Bowen's presentation to attend Brienne Wenning's (University of Durham) talk entitled *As a Woman, As a Human: Narratives of Well-Being among Female Refugees in the North East of England*. The previous delegate had delayed the session severely, and by the time Brienne started her talk I had to move on to the final morning session at a different lecture room, resulting in completely missing it. In the main lecture hall, the subject of *Apprenticeship Anthropology in Museums: Perspectives on Fieldwork and Curatorship Models*, was presented by PhD student Magdalena Buchczyk (Goldsmiths College). Magdalena is curating an exhibition of Romanian artifacts that were sent to the Horniman museum in London as a gift in the '50s. The morning session ended with this engaging ethnographic representation on the history of collections but also the role of the modern museum.

The audience had the chance to be informed about the Anthropological Index Online by Dr Lyon; AIO is a useful online resource, a search engine for mainly English but also foreign language journals, held in the Centre for Anthropology Library at the British Museum (situated at the far back entrance). The next session brought together a panel of editors in anthropological journals (*History of Anthropology*, *Durham Anthropology Journal* and *ART/E/FACT*). The editors explained the publishing process and responded to students' questions. Again in this instance, more time than needed was offered, with the convenor trying to stretch the talk in order to fit the time slot. However, this extra time could have been used for questions after the delegates' presentations.

The post-lunchtime sessions left me with only three more paper presentations to attend as I had to leave before the end of the conference to make my way back to Oxford on a 5 hour train ride. Alex Rugens (University of Oxford) presented his research on *Cognitive Aspects of Ghost Beliefs*, and more importantly his results from his recent experiments. Alex talked about the cognitive interpretation of lab-produced ghosts with a mirror effect. The juxtaposition of traditional beliefs and cognitive aspects of the participants was interesting, although his inclination towards the scientific approach was apparent. The next paper presentation I decided to turn up at was Dori Beeler's (University of Durham), a fresher from Durham who presented her master's research project on *Reiki Embodied: An Anthropological Approach to Reiki*. Dori conducted ethnographic research with Reiki practitioners in the US; Reiki is a form of alternative medicine, based on healing by channelling positive energy. She is mainly using embodiment theory and will begin working on her topic to a doctorate level starting this academic year (2011-12). The final talk I attended was given by Rachel Douglas-Jones (University of Durham): *A Single Broken Thread: Integrity, Trust and Accountability in Asian Ethics Review Committees*. Although I was not familiar with the topic, I found the presentation engaging, a fascinating performance using wordplay, intriguing methodology, and ethnographic material from Rachel's research.

Finally, I would like to stress two points. Firstly, who is the conference addressing to? Recently graduated anthropology students? MA/Msc graduates? PhD candidates? Junior researchers? I experienced the following distinction: the opening talks and the afternoon panels about AIO and publishing in anthropology captivated the attention of MA/MSc graduates - in fact, the line between the academic body and the conference audience was made clear. As I have previously stated in the majority of my written work, there is no objective criticism, and here I would like to underline my perspective. As a doctorate student I had the feeling of being marketed "anthropology": how and why to become a member of RAI, why and how should I write and publish in anthropological journals, what types of jobs are "out there". This is all very interesting information, which I would prefer to see outside lecture rooms, as it usually occurs in conferences, but I do not think it should be part of the main body even of a graduate conference - especially when time allocations are not well planned for the paper presentations.

One last criticism I would like to make, is a geographical one. Since the event is mainly addressed to graduate students - whoever they may be! -, who often do not receive adequate funding to attend conferences, it should perhaps be considered next year to divide the distance between London

and the North and meet somewhere in the Midlands, where it would be more affordable money and time wise. Overall, it certainly was a pleasure attending RAI's 1st Postgraduate Conference. I will definitely consider submitting an abstract next year provided that time allocations will have improved.