

Skanda Vale Reflexive Journal:**An Anthropologist's guilt.****Arriving with Baggage:**

'Our experiences and interpretations and our tales from and of the field shape and are shaped by our understandings of reciprocity' (Harrison et al, 2001, p.324).

As a group of young and keen student anthropologists, we all arrived at Skanda Vale with little nerves and our hands full of clothes, sleeping bags, duvets and our offerings to which we were able to off load into a mini bus when we arrived. However, as we descended down the path through the woods that would take us into the valley of Skanda Vale, none of us could have anticipated the inner baggage and prejudices that would be revealed to us, and as for myself, the baggage I was to carry for the rest of the trip.

When we first arrived, we were met by Brother Andy who would act as the gatekeeper between us as students and with the rest of the community. I was taken back by how 'normal' he seemed. I had arrived with the misconception that the monks would all be wearing white robes and would have an overly 'religious' aura about them. However, Brother Andy was simply wearing a fleece, trousers and wellies and at first glance, he could have easily been mistaken for a local farmer. I would soon learn that Brother Andy had worked as a secondary school teacher prior to his time at Skanda Vale and that he had a wife and children. This was not at all what I had expected. It also surprised me how 'down to earth' he seemed. He immediately made us feel welcomed and eased us with his light hearted jokes. He told us the history of the place and showed us the tomb where the Guru was buried. I was moved by how he spoke of the Guru as a life long friend and how he expressed a deep love for him, rather than just viewing him as the founder and leader of Skanda Vale. This reassured me that this was not a place to be feared but sounded like a tight knit community where the monks and sisters convened as a family and had a genuine openness and care for one another as well as the pilgrims.

Skanda Vale as a place itself was breathtakingly beautiful. The community was based in the middle of a valley and was surrounded by acres of forests that lined the various hillsides. The path that descended into the valley was soon met by a variety of buildings; some modern looking buildings and individual wooden huts that looked more like little ski chalets. Overall the place looked like a mountain retreat or ski resort with no

snow. The first Puja we attended that day was at 1:30 in the afternoon. The temple itself was another surprise. I had again assumed that the temples would be stereotypical stone buildings similar to traditional stone churches in the UK. The temples at Skanda Vale however were all different. The one that we were in for most of the pujas was a room that had a glass front. It was a simple room with carpet flooring on which we sat on that faced curtains at the front. When the curtains were drawn back, there was a large alcove that included a large shrine in the middle with a painting of a Hindu God. There were also little shrines surrounding it. One for Jesus, one for Mary mother of Christ, another one for the late Guru and then also some others at the back of god's that I did not recognise. I was frustrated that I did not know anything about Hinduism so could not recognise the symbols these gods portrayed and this was something that continued to frustrate me for the rest of the trip. It was the lack of understanding about the rituals and the foreign chants that made it hard for me to fully participate or indulge in the way that I had originally hoped to. This is what I believed to be the start of my 'anthropologists guilt.' The puja itself included the ringing of bells, the banging of drums and a series of chanting of names. I sat there and watched the monks at the front swing back and forth in what could only be described as a trance. It was mesmerizing. There was also a Hindi family that had travelled up from London that day for their own personal pilgrimage. I watched them also as they seemed to be likewise in a trance. I could see how meaningful and important these rituals were to the other pilgrims as well as the monks as it was an actual act of worship for them. I couldn't help but feel intrusive. As if because I didn't believe nor did I know what to do that I was not a pilgrim but a mere stranger intruding on a special moment for these people. It was then that I felt a deep uncomfortableness and I was overcome with a guilt for watching these people embark on what seemed so personal and meaningful to them. For me, I no longer felt right in observing my research participants because I could not participate myself.

Participating in Prejudice:

As a researcher, Skanda Vale became a crucial experience for me in the realisation and unpacking of my own prejudices. To the extent that this was the most vital factor in causing me to return home sooner than expected. Apart from the baggage that I had arrived in Skanda Vale with, my first encounter with 'participating in prejudice' occurred at the end of the first puja. Up until this point I had not yet had a negative thought about the trip. However questions behind the gender separation that was apparent within the community began to ring in my head. Our first real encounter with this was during the puja when men had to sit on one side and women on the other. At the end of the puja,

the monks bring around burning incense as well as ash and a yogurt. This was a ritual in which we had to cleanse ourselves with the burning incense as a way of 'letting go of the negative things in our lives.' After the incense, you then dip ash and a red substance onto your forehead before being given a spoonful of a kind of yogurt in your right hand. To begin with I was nervous as I was trying to remember the briefing Brother Andy had given us beforehand. I was sitting at the front by the monks so prepared myself to be one of the first to receive the flame assuming that it would go back row by row. However, it did not and the monks firstly took the flame around the men before coming to the women. This took me by surprise. I had readied myself and stepped towards the monk with the flame to find that he would brush past me and took the flame towards the men. For me, this was the first time at Skanda Vale in which I felt belittled because of my gender and I was embarrassed that I had stepped out in front of my fellow anthropologists to then have the monk simply look at me and then brush past me. As a keen feminist and a big believer in complete gender equality this deeply unsettled me and I couldn't help but feel inferior simply because of my gender. However I came to accept the notion and met it again in other pujas with more respect. I was learning to move between my own beliefs and between the events that were transpiring in front of me and as Okely points out it was the 'movement back and forth (in ethnographic investigation) between experience and consciousness' (Okely, 1992, p.13). Towards the end of the trip, the gender divide would no longer be at the forefront of my mind.

Once the flame finally came to me, I was terrified of messing up because I could only assume that if I had done so it would have been met with judgment from the monks and to me it would have felt almost sinful. This was the second aspect of prejudice recognised. I had all of these misconceptions that I was constantly being judged and watched by the monks. There was no real reason to believe this as every monk I met on the trip were overly friendly and made us as a group feel very welcomed. However I couldn't help but experience a sense of paranoia during the trip that I was being carefully watched for conversion or that I was being judged for being a 'sinner' and not believing or particularly caring that much about the religious side of affairs. To top this feeling, I had completely missed my mouth with the yogurt they gave us. It was a mixture of what I believe to be goats milk, fat and honey. I left the puja with this substance all over me and I just felt embarrassed and that deep uncomfortableness began to root within me. 'What on earth am I doing here?' was the lingering question in my head. I kept telling myself that as an anthropologist it was to be expected that I would feel uncomfortable and that I would have had little knowledge of the rituals because that was what I was there to learn. Recognising my own prejudices was only crucial for my reflexivity which Davies highlights is 'the way which the products of

research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research' (Davies, 2002, p.4).

The rest of the afternoon in contrast was met with a peace and excitement. Brother Andy split us into groups to do our tasks for the day which meant that I got to spend the afternoon painting in the sun. I was blown away for most of the day at just how beautiful and magical the place began to feel. It did in fact feel like I had left Wales and entered another world. Nothing was familiar and yet I was fulfilled painting fences and benches looking at the hillsides and felt utter detachment from my 'normal life'. After we finished painting Brother Andy made us tea as the sun began to set and we stood beside the lake overlooking the rest of Skanda Vale. At this moment in time I was beyond excited that I was to spend a week here learning and working. My prejudices and baggage was suppressed and I enjoyed talking to Brother Andy as more like a friend or even an father/uncle figure. I encountered one problem however which was that I wasn't really sure what I was researching anymore. I originally had plan for my research focus to be on gender roles and the divide within the community. However, Brother Andy had already earlier in the day explained that the Guru was very orthodox and that some rules just had to be in place for example, the gender separation rules. However when we tried to question him further he expressed a concern for us researching this piece and told us that many monks won't want to talk about it. He said that personally, he didn't agree with all of the rules himself but then he dropped the line saying, "but I really shouldn't be saying any of this and I will not be talking about it further." I felt concerned for my research and now felt as though my focus was too controversial and I didn't feel right with continuing it. I had decided in that moment that my main research task was going to be to completely focus on participant observation and to fully immerse myself into Skanda Vale life rather than setting up informal interviews that was originally in my methodology.

In the evening at 6pm we attended a puja in the Kali temple up on the hill. This was my favourite puja and was the only puja where I had a genuine fascination for the ritual. The Puja itself seemed devised around the female Hindu God Kali and involved the monks cutting up fruit whilst chanting and presenting it to the Kali statue. Before we went into the inner temple, those who were either on their periods, had eaten meat or had young children were asked to sit outside in the foyer. I immediately felt bad for my fellow student Bori who had to sit outside alongside the Mother from the Hindu family that were visiting that day. A sense of helplessness came upon me in which I felt wrong that I could enter and the mother could not. Having observed her earlier in the day, I was mesmerized by how important these pujas seemed to her and the level of passion she seemed to acquire whilst participating in the rituals. Again I experienced my guilt

because I wasn't all that interested in the pujas themselves and equally my prejudice and cynical mindset towards religion gave me an unsettlement and unworthiness about being within the temple. Furthermore I felt truly frustrated that those on their periods could not enter and I know that it was my lack of understanding about Hinduism that made it hard for me to accept the nature of it. I began asking myself questions. Was menstrual blood seen as dirty? Was it impure or contaminated? I had immediately assumed the worst. I had a misconception that women were probably not valued within this community or were shunned when on their periods and the fact that this was the first time this had been shown to me upfront, it genuinely upset me. I didn't allow room for respecting or asking the monks as to why. Upon my return home however I have since learnt that in that culture, when a woman is on her period, she holds a strong power and that the energy would be too strong and dangerous for the woman to be involved in the puja. The rules were in fact made to protect the female, not shun them. I feel as though this is another prime example of how I met my experiences at Skanda Vale with a cynical and prejudicial mindset that prevented me from fully engaging with my participants or allowing myself to open up and respect their ideas. I have since had the realisation that I had subconsciously arrived with judgement and was too ready to challenge rather than to learn.

Within the actual Puja itself, I was for the most of it fully mesmerised. The room was small and dark and was candlelit. There was a consistent and overpowering cloud of incense which created a surreal atmosphere. On the walls there were pictures of gods, monks and the Guru. At the front of the temple, there were mini shrines but also a large black statue of Kali within its own little alcove which was lit up. The statue had to me a scary appeal as it was large, matt black and had a bright red tongue sticking down towards the ground. I found her slightly intimidating. The focus on her within the ritual gave me a feeling of a surreal presence and I found myself also falling into a slight trance as I gazed at her throughout the ritual. I watched as my fellow students joined in on the chants. I felt my anthropologists guilt again as I wasn't joining in so felt that I was not fully participating. I began to try and mimic the words but eventually felt embarrassed and stopped. I had hit yet another blockage to allowing myself to fully engage with my research and to fully understand the experience. Again I felt uncomfortable. My cynical presupposition to religion and faith made me feel unworthy of being in such a place because I couldn't seem to push my judgements aside. The ritual was intriguing and beautiful but I couldn't allow myself to not be judgemental or feel embarrassed whilst conducting my research. This was a crucial flaw to me as an anthropologist and as Okely summarises, I should have been able to, 'work through the specificity of the anthropologist's self in order to contextualize and transcend it' (Okely, 1992, p.2).

Regret:

On the second day of my expected week long trip to Skanda vale, I had made the decision to return home. With a past of growing up within different Christian systems and a troubling 4 years within a strict new religious movement, it became clear to me that Skanda Vale was a place of realisation for myself of my own suppressed prejudices against organised religion and faith in general, which evidently began to affect my research. I couldn't participate or indulge myself into my work as much as I had wanted to and by the second day I felt deeply uncomfortable and it was agreed that it was best for my well being to leave the field. Upon my return however I felt regretful for this decision and felt as if I had failed as an anthropologist. During the weeks of my reflection on the experience, I felt bitter that I could not overlook my prejudices in order to fulfill my work and have since struggled with my 'anthropologist's guilt.'

I feel as though I judged too quickly and had an automatic barrier against building a solid rapport with my participants. Perhaps if I had stayed longer, this barrier might have been removed as at times during Skanda Vale I was able to see my participants in a more respectful and friendly manner, for example, by the end of my time I no longer saw Brother Andy as just a monk but more so as a friend and someone I could trust and talk to. 'In an effort to honor our participants, we may find ourselves refusing to deal with the hard stuff— sentimentalizing and romanticizing some participants and demonizing others' (Harrison et al, 2001, p.325). I found myself guilty for being an anthropologist who had been welcomed into the community who then couldn't help but not feel comfortable because I was too cynical of the whole place and the beliefs that drive it. As well as this, I have since struggled with the pure nature of what it means to be an anthropologist. I struggled with the notion that my interpretation of the experience was obviously flawed by my own beliefs and feared that my work that will come from it would be one of a challenging nature against Skanda Vale. However, I do not have anything against Skanda Vale or the people; it is simply a lack of understanding and a difficulty to suppress my own feelings in order to fully engage with the religious practises within the community. I fully believe however that if I had stayed for longer or went back then I would be ready as an anthropologist to fully understand my prejudices and to not let it completely obscure my interpretation of such a unique experience.

'The reflexive knowledge of fieldwork is acquired not only from an examination of outside categories, but also from more intangible inner experience' (Okely, 1992, p.16)."

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