

## What does our Discipline mean? Uncertainties of students in perception of ethnology and cultural anthropology/case study of Kosova

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### Abstract:

When in 2001 the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at University of Prishtina was opened for the first time, there was a lack of knowledge about this field of study. Students that enrolled in the Department came up with different reasons and motivations. Since then, the Department made changes and transformations to both the curriculum and the pedagogical approaches used. These changes opened the department to collaborative teaching methods. Over time, narrowly defined, traditional concepts of ethnology and anthropology were expanded into diverse methods, theories and approaches. This article considers the ways in which the department developed and how anthropology was perceived by the students. What were the dilemmas and uncertainties that accompanied students in their choice? How much did parents, relatives and their friends support them? If they would have another opportunity, would they make the same choice again? These are the questions that will be discussed in this paper, besides my personal experience and reflection, firstly as a student in this department and later as teaching assistant.

**Key words:** Knowledge, methods, concept, tradition, experience

### Introduction:

When we talk about the development of Ethnology in Kosovo, both on the individual and institutional level, we are primarily referring to the post 1950s era. Museums and ethnologists, who were very few in number and enthusiastic about popular/folk culture or cultural heritage, played a special role in the development of this discipline. Regarding institutions, mention should be given to the Museum of Kosovo, which was founded in 1949 and started working in 1951. In 1956, the Museum started publishing its own magazine, the *Bulletin of the Museums of Kosovo*, which deals with topics of cultural heritage. The Albanological Institute also played a crucial role in the development of ethnology, especially when the Department of Ethnology was established in 1978 as an independent branch within the Institute. From 1967 it began to publish the scientific journal *Albanological Research*, a Folklore and Ethnology series where numerous articles were published about popular/folk culture from different region of Kosova (Statovi, 2014, pp 354-368).

In 1994, a course called Ethnology began to be taught in the Department of History in the University of Prishtina. When in 2001, the University of Prishtina reformed, the Faculty of Philosophy opened new Departments including Psychology, Political Science, and Ethnology. The founder of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology was Prof. Drita Statovci, who at the time was working in the Albanological Institute as the head of the Department of Ethnology. It is worth mentioning that she was the daughter of the first ethnologist in Kosova, Kadri Halimi. She prepared the department proposal for the Univeristy of Prishtina, and fortunately the Council gave the green light to open the department. These developments demonstrate a growing recognition of the very rich and quite well preserved culture in Kosova that needed to be documented and studied. The opening of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology opened the doors for documenting that culture further. Interest in becoming the first generation to study ethnology within one of the new departments was shown by numerous students, myself being one of them. Besides, it was seen to be a department with great perspectives, especially engaging in various cultural, scientific institutes, and museums.

I had known about ethnology far earlier, through the papers and books I had read. I always liked to work with people, listen to their stories, and open a wider horizon by regarding their views on life. I thought there were many things that needed not only to be documented, but also interpreted and reinterpreted. According to the curriculum, in the beginning students were taught about the traditional way of life, as well as about national and

international flows through an ethnological perspective - without leaving aside the good knowledge of tangible or intangible culture. There were courses about social theory, family and kinship relations, as well as newer areas of study such as ecological anthropology or applied anthropology.

As mentioned earlier, the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Prishtina was founded in October 2001, meaning that full studies in the field of ethnology and cultural anthropology in Kosovo started for the first time in the academic year 2001/2002. But before that, Drita Statovci foreshadowed this development in her essay about 'Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Republic of Kosova', when she described what she said to students in her first lecture in 1996 while teaching the Ethnology course delivered by the Department of History/Faculty of Philosophy:

The course of Ethnology will be an embryo for a bigger tomorrow - one day we will have the department ethnology, we will have our educated and well trained ethnologists able for organizing organizational work in the field of ethnology and cultural anthropology. (Statovi, 2014, pp 358)

This quote summed up the sentiment at the time, that establishing such a department in Kosovo was a monumentally important step.

In 2014, due to Department reorganization and re-accreditation, the name changed from 'The Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology' to simply 'Department of Anthropology'. The program offered takes a more holistic approach to the study of human society and includes cultural anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, history, art history, the study of language, architecture, economy, politics, as well as other study fields. Students can study in two different programs: a) archaeology and b) cultural anthropology. In the first year of study, all the students take joint courses related to general Anthropology, and from the second year they continue with the respective elective fields, archaeology or cultural anthropology, and take more specific courses. Methods and theories are based on contemporary perspectives – including a focus on fieldwork and the interrelation of the social sciences and humanities – and aims to be integral to the study of culture in the educational, scientific, social and economic development of Kosovo. The study plan includes courses which have been designed to interact with one another and reflect the three main focuses of the study program: 1. Identity and Practice; 2. Time and Space; and 3. The Production and Institutionalization of Culture. The Department curriculum, same as all programs in the University of Prishtina, goes through an accreditation process. This means that programs are evaluated by international experts and the program also needs to be compared with other similar programs in the other European Universities. The program aims to provide foundational studies in ethnology and cultural anthropology, and archaeology; educate a generation of new interdisciplinary academics, research and professional staff in these fields that are of great relevance to Kosovo and the region; and create a mutual foundation for further specialization in particular fields. Both study programs aim to train specialist who can apply their knowledge in the subfields of anthropology and related disciplines.

I was lucky to be the first generation of student in the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at Prishtina, the generation (2001/2002). At the time, I often encountered many people asking me what I was studying, and when I would say Ethnology, they were confused and linked it with Ecology, Technology, or Archaeology. However, this fact has never de-motivated me, on the contrary it has motivated me and encouraged me to continue the conversation with them and explain what the science of Ethnology actually means. The first word that I mention in such cases is culture.

Nowadays, we try to promote the discipline through various activities. From 2019 the Department started to organize the Anthropology Seminar series: during the entire academic year one lecture per month is held by different national and international scholars discussing different topics of anthropological content, which aims to advance free and critical anthropological thinking. Discussions are also facilitated by organizing special lectures, roundtables and other scientific and professional activities. Since the majority of the Department staff finished their studies outside of Kosova, they brought back a new spirit and energy to the department. Courses reflect the expertise and research of department staff. As has often been said, if you want to understand what anthropology is, look what anthropologists do. And what anthropologists do is, above all, ethnography (Monaghan and Just, 2000, pp.12).

Currently, anthropologists undergo field research in less exotic environments such as television stations, in city centres, courts, cities, halls, and councils. Anthropology is the study of human beings as creatures of society. It is interested in human behaviour, not as it is shaped by one tradition, our own, but as it has been shaped by many

traditions. It is interested in the great gamut of custom that is found in various cultures, and its object is to understand the way in which these cultures change and differentiate, the different forms through which they express themselves, and the manner in which the customs of any people function in the lives of the individuals who compose them (Bendict,1934). Paraphrasing the anthropologist Clifford Geertz all humans are born with the potential to live thousands of different lives, yet we end up having lived only one. One of the central tasks of anthropology consists of giving accounts of some of the other lives we could lead (Eriksen, 2004).

The way we as a faculty prefer to tell the new generations of students what anthropology is, is to talk with them about the activities which older students were involved in before. For example, we describe the project “Memory of Kosovo” – 100 stories by 100 old men and women’, realized by the National Library of Kosovo and the Department of Anthropology. This project contains 100 autobiographical interviews of elders over 80 years old situated in different parts of Kosova. Interviews are authentic life stories of seniors about their lives from childhood to old age, including various themes of political, economic, cultural, social and religious events. As a department we frequently collaborate with different cultural institutions, including museums. Our students have consequently taken part in different activities organized by the former National Museum of Kosova – for example they were part of marking the International day of Museums; participated in different activities of the Mobil Museum; and worked on staging different temporary exhibitions both in national museum and other different local museums around Kosova.

Because field work is considered a very important and crucial part of ethnology, the Department has conducted a series of exploratory expeditions in Kosovo for tracing different traditional calendar rites, documenting their inscriptions as well as practices. Research expeditions were organized in Albania too. Lack of funds remains the crucial problem that the Department faces for fieldwork research. Fieldwork is primarily done individually by professors researching different phenomena around Kosova as part of their curricula on different courses such as: Methods and techniques in Anthropology, Anthropology of food, Museums and exhibiting culture, Urban Anthropology etc. Ethnographic films are also shown to help students be better informed about other cultures and the ways in which film can be used to bridge gaps between peoples. In the beginning, a main motive for enrolling in an anthropology department was the fieldwork. Given the department had conducted numerous fieldwork activities within Kosova, the documentation of different traditional rites within the country was considered most attractive. .

During its time as the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, work began on an archive of photos and videos to preserve and promote the research conducted by students, as well as raise public awareness about the field of ethnology and anthropology. These products are used for teaching and research purposes within the Department but are also available to other departments as well.



**Image 1:** Rite of calling the Rain, Romaje, Kosova, 2011 photographed by Faton Maliqi

Due to the fact that anthropology is not part of the curriculums within the of Kosovo primary and secondary school system, first year university students generally have no previous knowledge about the discipline of anthropology. They

might have some scant knowledge about anthropology from standard biology courses, where they learned only the etymology of the word 'anthropology', but not what social or cultural anthropology is. Since students are not so well informed, I was curious to know the answers to several questions: If they have no information about what anthropology is, then what do students assume is its object of study? What motivates students to study anthropology? In order to find these answers, I have been asking students for more than 7 years about their motivation to study anthropology. Below, I share some of the reasons given:

- Studying anthropology was not their first choice; they were thinking (intended) to study some different program.
- They got information from their relatives or friends who were current students or had been previous students in the department of anthropology. When they found out what their friends/relatives studied, they then decided to choose to study anthropology also and continued to familiarise themselves with the object of study.
- Their parents, who had studied social sciences and were informed about anthropology, recommended them to study anthropology. They already had books in the house, so they used to read before enrolling in anthropology.

Recognising the uncertainties of students about what the field of study really is and what they are going to do once they finish their studies, the department has worked on finding ways to promote the Department. The department produced a 'Manual' that presented the department curriculum and staff biographies. This included a basic definition of what is anthropology is, what the department does, past and present activities and the perspectives of alumni students. Students are usually also told that post studies they would be welcomed into careers in educational, institutional, cultural, or scientific research institutes; in institutions for the protection of monuments; in various archives; in government institutions and relevant ministries of culture; cultural journalism; management of institutions of cultural heritage and tourism. Given the spectrum of knowledge students acquired on culture during their studies, Kosovo is considered to offer unlimited possibilities for employment, alternatively students might also choose to continue with further extensive studies.

While asking students of different generations about their interests in the field of anthropology, I have recognized certain changes. For example, when I asked what topics they wanted to study, when the department was named Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, students were focused more on tradition, weddings, or rituals. Later when the department was renamed as the Department of Anthropology, and more diverse courses were offered, students wanted to study topics related to popular culture, fast food, and similar. It is worth noting that after re-accreditation in 2014, when the two fields of archaeology and anthropology were offered, several students after the first year of study change their first choice interest, that is those who enrolled in archaeology end up liking and finishing cultural anthropology and vice versa.

### **What is anthropology? The student point of view**

As I mentioned above, in the first lecture with new students of anthropology I used to ask them several questions in order to find out more about their prior knowledge of the field, their interests and their expectations. Here, I present some of the questions and answers.

Question: How to you define anthropology?

Student 1: Anthropology is interesting, and I thought credible for me as a person to study.

Student 2: I did not know exactly what it means. But when I heard about anthropology, I come to study it.

Student 3: I like to study foreign cultures.

Student 4: I want to study ancient populations, cultures.

When I asked: 'What kind of topics would you like to do research on? What do you want to study? What kind of topics?', Because there was not yet visa liberalization, many students said they would like to study their own culture, like customs, beliefs etc. but there were also students who wanted to study foreign cultures and customs.

Question: what do you particularly like about discipline of Anthropology?

It is interesting to note that the most frequent answer on this question was 'The fieldwork'. Here I would like to highlight a discussion with one of the students who claimed,

I am lucky that my friend told me about anthropology because I did not know what to study. When the teacher asked me in the secondary school, what are you going to study I would say that I would like something I really want where I can see and analyse thing. I really want to have an anthropology course in primary or secondary school because anthropology is the rescue for youngsters, they need to know. I really was so curios to know what she [teacher] thinks saying consolation why not psychology or the other science. Psychologist is not you, is the other, anthropology is you, and you could help yourself, better than the other may help you. You will understand yourself better.

He continued on saying that anthropology helps to understand diversity, enables one to meet lots of people.

Student 2: I did not know that anthropology has to do with everyday life, the way you eat, drink and wear. This strikes me and I would like to teach the world the everyday life of an anthropologist.

Question: What was the reaction of family and friends when you told them you are going to study anthropology?

Student 1: When I told my friends I will study anthropology they did not have quite a clear idea what it is all about. The reaction of friends, I had an impression that if one explained them better what it is about ...I am sure many of them would become future students of anthropology.

Student 2. When I told my family about my interest in anthropology, the first question was “what you do with it? Where will you be employed?”

Student 3. And it is very interesting, this department makes me link much more with my family and relatives. I have been asking them different things related to family history which makes me learn about my own family history. They have been my partners.

The students' answers made me think that the great enigma of anthropology can be phrased like this by Eriksen (2004).

All over the world, humans are born with the same cognitive and physical apparatus, and yet they grow into distinctly different persons and groups. With different societal types, beliefs, technologies, languages and notions about the good life, differences in innate endowments vary within each group and not between them, so that musicality, intelligence, intuition and other qualities which vary from persons to person, are quite evenly distributed globally. Anthropology is a subject which has the potential to change the lives of those who choose to enter it. (Eriksen 2004, p10.)

## **Conclusion**

This paper shows the evolutionary development of the Department of Anthropology in the University of Prishtina and how student perceptions of what this field deals with has broadened over time. Considering that the department deepened communication with different departments all around the world and invited many scholars to exchange their experiences with students, it is not surprising that today the department represents more contemporary aspects of the field.

Today the department of Anthropology enrolls approximately 40 new students a year. To encourage prospective student who had no knowledge of anthropology, the Department designed a Manual to better promote the department and anthropology before students enrolled. This sought to answer their main questions from the beginning.

The Department has also traditionally involved students in different project during their studies, which helped them gain sufficient experience and knowledge before they step out to the employment market. In this manner they were continuously encouraged to present, exhibit, and publish their work in venues available through the University of Prishtina, museums, galleries, institutes, media, and various international forums. This not only developed their professional skills, but also promoted a wider understanding of the subject.

The curriculum program in the Department of Anthropology is designed to help students gain different knowledge and skills, especially in Anthropological methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews. Considering the openness of the field for multi-disciplinarity, students have the opportunity to develop a broad range of skills

through the field projects they are involved in, skills that can equip them for jobs in many different institutions dealing with social and cultural issues, such as the Ministry of Culture, Museums, Research Institutions, and initiation of NGOs.

The Department is also contributing to raising the awareness of the importance of the field of ethnology and cultural anthropology at an institutional level by taking serious steps in advocating to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the importance of cultural heritage as a subject in high school curricula. This way high school students will be motivated quite early to study ethnology and anthropology, knowing that the importance lies in knowing the self, recognizing the past, noticing changes over time, but also analyzing the current state of affairs. Moreover, the presence of such a subject in high school curricula would give a great impetus for more students to enroll in this Department, since future employment in high schools could pose a real and concrete motivation.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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