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### **After Ram Left Home: Visual Ethnography of the Nepali migration to Japan**

#### **Summary**

This ethnographic film (part of my PhD research project) tells a story of Ram who migrated to Japan 3 years ago from the mountainside of Nepal. Ram has been working as a *nan* (bread) maker at a Nepali restaurant in Japan. He had to pay US\$ 20,000 to a Nepali restaurant owner for a work visa to enter Japan. His family received a loan from their relatives with the commitment of paying back them later with an additional 20% interest. Beside the cause and process of Ram's migration, the film will show the social consequence for his life and his family in Nepal since he migrated to Japan. The film depicts the dreams and realities underlying family relationships in rural Nepal. The longer version of the film "Playing with Nan" (89 minutes) has already been screened more than 60 international film festivals around the world and has won several awards, most remarkably the David Plath Media Award 2014 at American Anthropological Association Meeting in Washing DC 2014 and the Best Student Film Prize at the Royal Anthropological Institute Festival of Ethnographic Film in 2013.

In my PhD project, utilizing George Marcus's concept of multi-sited ethnography (1995) I have conducted fieldwork in Japan as well as in Nepal to document the transnational networks and activities of Nepali migrants. I have used the video camera as a research tool to record the daily lives of Nepali immigrants in Japan and the migrants' family life in Nepal. I found the video camera to be an effective research tool, in following the transnational network of immigrants in Japan and their families in Nepal, and in collecting data on their transnational activities. This project therefore may contribute ideas about how visual methods can be applied to study transnational migration. The visual ethnographic fieldwork data are very effective to tell the story of the Nepali migration to Japan, emphasizing the daily life of Nepali immigrants in Japan and the transnational processes by which the immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and of settlement. The visual data depicts the circulation of people, funds, and ideas within transnational families that extend from Nepal to Japan.

Furthermore, utilizing Sarah Pink's (2001) ideas of visual ethnography I was able to record their full actuality in moving images which convey what words are inadequate to do (Bateson and Mead, 1942). For example; cooks' skills and techniques, the details of their *nan* making processes, the technique of putting their hand into the hot-oven, the tone of their conversational and social life around the kitchen areas, the existence of strong emotion, feeling, friendships or hostilities and of

passing sympathies and dislikes between workers, all I recorded by my video camera which enhance the understanding of 'social situations' at restaurants.

In her writing "Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words"(1995:5) Margaret Mead has described that film eye is more perfect than the human eye, and that therefore, it provides a more precise records of happening. I have experienced this through my visual ethnographic fieldwork with Nepali restaurant workers at Nepali restaurants in Japan. I realized that my field notes about making *nan* never provided me with the understanding of the making *nan* process that the rough footage provided. For several years I was engaged with the daily life of Nepali cooks and their *nan* making process, but I still do not find it easy to explain to readers about their knowledge of making *nan* in the way that I feel the film can, much more effectively. This idea can be supported by MacDougall's concept of film. He says, "Film is capable of presenting complex networks of images within which a variety of ambiguous cultural construction and resonances are understood ..." (1998:80). As Hastrup (1992:10) suggests, the film images that are drawn from the 'other culture' itself speak about the culture in detail. She has emphasized that through the film records, we can observe the situations, feel the movements, and make the sense of events, which provide a good opportunity to develop ethnographic text with 'think description' (Geertz 1973)

While conducting the fieldwork, the visual method helped me to develop rapport with immigrants in Japan and their families in Nepal. I recorded video film of Nepali immigrants' life in Japan and screened it on my laptop for their family members in Nepal. While screening, I observed their reactions to the video and filmed that. Similarly, I recorded the lives of the migrants' families in Nepal and screened that for my informants in Japan. I found these video screenings were very useful to evoke comments, memories, and discussions which also provided very useful understanding about the immigrants' previous background, their social networks, and the migration process. I therefore used the visual techniques as a medium of enquiry and communication with informants, and a way of obtaining more information from them.

The camera provided me with great opportunities to increase my understanding in the process of reviewing with informants footages which was recorded in different social settings in Japan and Nepal. During my fieldwork, I managed times to review some important footages with informants which helped me get a complete idea of particular situation. In addition, after the fieldwork while transcribing data, from ethnographic footages into ethnographic text for writing my PhD dissertation, I have got again another opportunity to see ethnographic audio-visual records of my informants including their social spaces and activities in different social situations that again

refreshed my memories. The essential point is that if I had no camera, I could not manage to review the situations I had observed. Certainly, transcribing more than 600 hours ethnographic footages into ethnographic text was very time-consuming process. Indeed, I have spent several months for it. However, through the process, I have learned correspondence between footage film and ethnographic notes, on the one hand, and ethnographic film and monograph, on the other as Yasuhiro Omori (1988) explained.

Furthermore, my film '*Playing with Nan*' screenings at several international film festivals and academic conferences and seminars were very useful to get constructive comments for the advancement of my dissertation research and writing. During the film screening, I have received comments from many audiences and I talked with large number of people from different nationalities, professions, and socio-cultural groups. I found several different interpretations of the film based on the audience's socio-cultural background, professional area, and level of film literacy. Specifically the film screening at academic conferences such as American Anthropological Association conference, Royal Anthropology Institute conferences and other migration related conferences were crucial to get scholarly comments and advices on theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches. I found those comments and discussions were very useful for writing and structuring my PhD dissertation.

The current trend in doing visual ethnography and making ethnographic film is based primarily on single-sited ethnographic fieldwork. The single-sited approach is appropriate to provide anthropological information on local community, but is inadequate to present issues of anthropology of today which is more complicated and globalized such as transnational migration. Therefore, I intended to develop a new approach using multi-sited visual ethnography in my research project on transnational migration, following Nepali migrants moving across cultural and geographical boundaries. By recording ethnographic images of the daily lives of immigrants in Japan and their families in Nepal, I became able to show the relationship between them and their dynamic interaction in the migration process. This multi-sited visual ethnography research therefore allows me to make a distinctive methodological contribution in visual anthropology as well transnational migration.