

ATrA African Transitions

"Linguistic and cultural areas of transition in Africa"

is a three year research project, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR) in the framework of its FIRB (Future in Research) call 2012.

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(Info taken from <http://www.africantransitions.it/index.html>)

WORKING FOR THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES

East Africa, ATrA's main field of research, is an area in which all typical phenomena of transition are manifest. These phenomena lay at the centre of our scientific interest. Great cultures, still alive or now extinct, immersed in a variety of local and peripheral traditions, cohabit in an environment stretching from the arid zones of Kordofan to the big river routes of the Nile and to the forestal zones of the Rift Valley, in a plurality of milieux that involves a consequent plurality of natural resources and ways of human adaptation. In such an unstable context, from an ecological, a sociocultural and a linguistic point of view, the continuous shaping and re-shaping of identity between centre and periphery, demands of necessity a multidisciplinary approach. For this reason we are sure that the collaboration in ATrA of experts of the different disciplines of Human Sciences, such as archaeologists, historians, anthropologists and linguists is in fact needed.

OUR PROJECT

ATrA meets the third priority of the EU program for research Horizon 2020 (Challenges of Society) and aims to an important methodological and theoretical contribution to one of the currently central issues in the field of integration and cooperation to development: the safeguard of identity. Our work will mainly focus on areas of transition in East Africa and on the contrast between local and global dimensions of modernity. We see this study as a premise for the defense of human rights and as a necessary step towards a real participation of local communities to an economical renewal of developing countries. Cultural and ethnic identity is nowadays one of the most debated questions on an international level. Even though we admit that a prototypical X identity is characteristic of a human group, we also must admit that the farther we move from a paradigmatic centre to its periphery, the more we find ourselves in fuzzy areas, which we can call "of transition". However this is evident in history, in terms of methodological reasonableness, we still lack coherent and comparable general studies on the dynamics governing such a phenomenon. More, even though we are quite sure to know what a linguistic or a cultural area is, at the same time, we cannot deny that the two things do never perfectly coincide, at least in terms of ethnicity or geographical borders, and therefore, in these contexts, transition becomes a scientific pivotal issue. In East Africa the constant re-shaping and re-negotiation of identity, from a cultural centre to its periphery, in a continuous contact of great cultures, still alive or extinct (Egypt, Kerma, Meroe, Aksum, the Mediterranean, Greek, Roman and Byzantine world) intertwined with a variety of local and peripheral traditions in a plurality of very different social and ecological settings is evident. For this reason we have chosen this region as the main object of our study and we have decided to work in mixed teams, in which the collaboration of experts of the different disciplines of the Human Sciences can grant for a real interdisciplinary approach, which should lead to a more complete interpretation of complex and interconnected facts. In a coherent frame in terms of issues and methodology, are set the case studies of the single local unit, which will finally be compared and analyzed together with the others, in order to obtain a general interpretation of the phenomenon of transition itself.

OBJECTIVES

ATrA's main objective is to participate to the international debate on the issue of identity and identity declinations in unstable contexts, continuously modified due to external contacts and influences, in a world which is more and more conforming to the logics of economic and cultural globalization. The main issues are two: 1) collecting first hand comparative data, based on field researches on 11 case studies in contexts which have never been studied before, 7 of which modern and 4 historical; 2) on

the basis of a serious interdisciplinary analysis of the data coming from the fieldwork, trying a general interpretation of the problems identified, which can be detached from the actual historical, geographical and economical context and can represent a methodological and interpretive reference model also for other situations in other geographical, linguistic and cultural milieux characterized by economical, political and social instability. In this perspective the study of relational categories (Classen 1993), which unconsciously lay at basis of the behavior of a people towards another, and which can determine possibilities of integration and cooperation among the different parties, will be central.

OUR APPROACH

For what concerns methodology, the analysis of identity variation and of the re-definition of linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural habits in case studies 1-6 and 10, referring to modern contexts, will be based on a strictly qualitative approach. Even though usually the study of ethnolinguistic identity and of linguistic habits in general is based on a quantitative analysis of given questionnaires or on inductive methods (Matched Guide Technique), these research tools have the disadvantage to lead the speaker towards a limited set of often stereotyped evaluations. During our fieldwork we will thus analyze the different ethnolinguistic and cultural identities starting from a non-planned observation of the habits of native speakers through the audio / video recording of interviews in a (semi)spontaneous setting. In collaboration with anthropologists, who will mainly focus on material culture, following the guidelines of the French Techno-Cultural anthropology school, linguists will concentrate on the specialized lexicon of determined semantic fields and cycles of activity, using the classical method of the German tradition of *Wörter und Sachen*, already successfully applied for the ATMCS of the Saho of Eritrea by Giorgio Banti (ATrA UNO), Moreno Vergari and Giovanni Dore (Ethnorêma, ATrA Units). The archaeological fieldwork will consist in the excavations and surface collections conducted at selected site. In both these phases the facilities (hardware e software) offered by the Laboratory of African Archaeology of the Department of Asia, Africa, and Mediterranean and of the Center for Archaeology of the University "L'Orientale" will be used. For what concerns philology, the traditional methodology of historic-comparative linguistics will be used in order to reconstruct the most ancient forms of words and roots and analyze loanwords and lexical exchanges, while for the factual and cultural history of the regions studied, the methods of philology and text critics will be used. For the history of literature the indexation of texts will be prior, in order to realize lexical repertoires and conceptual indexes. In case 9 the investigation will be conducted above all analyzing contemporary literary sources (dated at the 5th -8th centuries AD) and the always growing archaeological evidence coming from the sites object of our study.

LOCAL TEAMS

ATrA Units: Ilaria Micheli and Franco Crevatin, ethnolinguists, experts of West Africa, Mau forest (Ilaria Micheli) and Kordofan (Franco Crevatin). External associate group: Ethnorêma Association (Moreno Vergari, linguist, and Giovanni Dore, anthropologists, experts of Eritrea and Ethiopia).

ATrA Unito: Dario Nappo, historian, expert of commercial routes of the Red Sea in Roman era; Mauro Tosco, linguist, expert in Omotic and pidgin and creole languages.

ATrA UNO: Ilaria Incordino, Egyptologist, Andrea Manzo and Luisa Sernicola, African archaeologists; Giorgio Banti, ethnolinguist, expert of Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Stefano Manfredi, linguist, expert of Arabic dialectology and Juba Arabic, and Gianfrancesco Lusini, philologist, expert of Tigré and Ge'ez. External members: Chiara Zazzaro, maritime archaeologist, expert of the Red Sea, Rodolfo Fattovich, African Archaeologist.

For other details on the teams see <http://www.africantransitions.it/ATrA-Units.html>

11 CASE STUDIES:WHAT ARE THEY AND WHO IS DEALING WITH THEM

(See http://www.africantransitions.it/casi_di_studio.html)

SAHO CASE STUDY

5) "Language, material culture and self-determination of the Saho of Eritrea and Ethiopia" Our aim is to analyze the Saho settlement as a pastoralist group in a historical perspective in the eastern part of the Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands as well as in their slopes. The idea is to understand and document those strategies which allowed the Saho to adopt, in any case with their own original interpretation, cultural characteristics of the highlands, considering also that the same adaptive strategies have permitted a significative Saho presence from Massawa down to the Danalia lowland and in the political and commercial nets between the Red Sea and the Sudanese hinterland. The Saho of Eritrea and Ethiopia speak a Eastern Cushitic language very close to 'Afar (a dialectal continuum divided in different genealogical lines, some of which consider themselves to be bound to Tigre or Tigrinya speaking clans). Of the Saho will be analyzed the traditional material culture, its dialects and toponymy.

Photo gallery. (See <http://www.africantransitions.it/gallery-saho.html>)