

Research Abstracts

Selected abstracts of research projects in social sciences and humanities
at Mekelle University¹

Community-Based Climate Change Adaptation: Interconnection of Environment Livelihood and Development in the Abrha we-Atsbha Farming Community of Eastern Tigray, Northern Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, recurrent droughts and food shortages have been rampant, resulting from environmental degradation and declining rainfall. Analyses conducted in the last few years suggest that an environmental rehabilitation is well underway in Tigray Regional State in northern Ethiopia. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, focus groups, and participant observation in the Abrha we-Atsbha community of Eastern Tigray, this study highlights some indigenous adaptation strategies that have been applied in the region and the benefits of integrating indigenous knowledge into formal climate change adaptation strategies. The local community in Abrha we-Atsbha, through their indigenous knowledge systems, have developed and implemented extensive adaptation strategies that have enabled them to reduce their vulnerability to past climate variability and change, which exceed those predicted by climate change models. Accordingly, farmers perceive that both overall seasonal rainfall and the underground water table have been improved along with increased vegetation cover over the last few years owing to their embedded practice patterns based on indigenous institutions. This perception is cross-checked by examining the rainfall patterns of the past ten years based on records from nearby meteorological stations at Wuqro and Sinqat'a. This knowledge is taken into consideration in the design and implementation of formal adaptation strategies. (Investigator: Aklilu Habtu Reda, Department of Anthropology).

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Changes and Continuities of Cultural Practices among the People of Rayya 1876-1943

Rayya has been host to different ethnic groups since about the 17th century due to the coming of the Oromo from the Awash area. That was followed by the influx of other ethnic groups into Rayya such as 'Afar, Agäw, Tigrayans and

¹ Abstracts submitted in 2012 by individual researchers. These abstracts only show a small extract of ongoing research projects. We encourage submissions from project leaders and principal investigators at all universities of the Northeastern African region.

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Amhara. This resulted in the intermixing of different cultural groups and cultures. That makes Rayya unique in terms of cultural practices, dialect and accent. In addition, ritual institutions of the people like *wādajja*, *tufəta*, *gaz* and *wäyyäné* are other markers that distinguish Rayya from other groups. The life of people in Rayya has basically depended on mixed farming, livestock and agriculture. Hence possessing a great number of cattle and producing a hundred quintals of *teff* and sorghum is seen as a sign of bravery, identity and pride. The community of Rayya were also identified as ‘warriors’ due to their culture of raiding and counter-raiding against the neighboring people of ‘Afar (east) and as far Säqot’a (west). Also their continuous resistance against Ethiopian rulers at different times has made Rayya a bone of contention between the Rayyans and those who tried to subdue them. That was evident in the reigns of Emperor Yoḥannəs IV, *ləj* Iyasu, Empress Zäwditu and *ras* Täfäri, during which the conflict reached its peak. One revolt of Rayya – to maintain their traditional autonomy – occurred in the immediate post-Fascist occupation period, when peasants from Wällo up to Əndärta waged a massive opposition campaign against the returned government of the Emperor. This research seeks to document the history of the Rayya people, its changes and continuities, and the attitude of other communities towards it. This will be done by incorporating oral traditions of the people supported by previous works and personal observations. The methodology will involve qualitative techniques of data gathering through semi-structured interviews, observation and focus group discussion field work on the selected sample sites of Rayya- ‘Azäbo, Rayya Allamaṭa, Rayya Qobbo, Ofla and Ənda-Mäḵoni *wärüda* of the southern and northern zones of Tigray and Amhara regions respectively. (Investigator: Bälay Dässaleñ Yəmār, Department of History and Cultural Studies).

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How rural-to-urban migrant status and perceptions of condom use and abstinence are related to motivation to learn about HIV/AIDS prevention among students in Mekelle University

This study aims to provide insight into the relationship between rural-to-urban migration status, motivation to practice abstinence and condom use, and motivation to learn about HIV/AIDS prevention education at Mekelle University. In many African countries, rural-to-urban migrations generally speaking are related to increased sexual behaviours accompanied by a drop off in motivation for safe sex. In this study, the investigator has assessed demographic variables from the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which are related to condom use and sexual abstinence, motivation to learn about HIV/AIDS prevention, and the relative attractiveness of the separate, carrier

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and integrated HIV/AIDS prevention curriculum designs. The findings revealed that rural-to-urban migrant status was not related to unsafe sexual behaviour and motivation to use condoms. On the contrary, students with a rural-to-urban migrant status were more positive about abstinence and perceived less social pressure to engage in premarital sex. Rural-to-urban migrant status and being a female were positively related to motivation to learn about HIV/AIDS. Regression analyses indicated that this relationship was mediated by abstinence-related attitudes and not by condom-related attitudes. Motivation to learn about HIV/AIDS prevention education was strongly related with the three HIV/AIDS curriculum designs mentioned above. Motivation to learn about HIV/AIDS correlated most strongly with the 'separate' curriculum design. The 'carrier' curriculum design was less attractive to rural-to-urban immigrant students. The 'integrated' HIV/AIDS curriculum design was found to be less attractive for the students who are more motivated to use condoms or have more positive attitude to abstinence. Overall results suggest that female rural-to-urban students are more motivated to learn about HIV/AIDS prevention education, due to a positive attitude to abstinence and less social pressure from friends for premarital sex. Their needs are best served by a separate curriculum design. (Principal Investigator: Haile Gebreyesus Hadera, Institute of Pedagogical Sciences).

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Research Project in Mezega and Surroundings, Western Tigray – Discoveries in Heritage and Culture, Improving the Livelihood

During the coming years, the planned Welqayt Irrigation and Sugar Project will change the landscape and the livelihood of the people in the Welqayt lowlands, especially in Mezega and Tsebri sub-weredas. Following an already-established tradition in Ethiopia, Mekelle University has initiated a research project to document the heritage and history of the region and study the livelihood of the people. Thus far a preliminary data assessment study has been done, to create the basis for a wider interdisciplinary project. When the main project starts, important stakeholders and further academic partners will be involved. Remnants of a 17th-century Gondarine castle, heretofore unknown to researchers, have been identified, situated above the future dam lake. Remains of two moribund languages, spoken in the past by the lowlanders, are currently under analysis. Low-scale projects to improve the livelihood of the concerned local peasants will be suggested. Claims by some observers that the Waldibba monastery is in danger are not correct. Included in the project is a study on how to help concerned religious communities in the area to preserve their heritage.

As widely reported in the press, Ethiopia is planning one more huge and important dam and irrigation, the Welqayt Irrigation Project, in the western Tigrayan lowlands of Mezega, which will lead to the creation of an artificial lake and a sugar cane plantation, precisely in the area of Mezega sub-*wereda* and Tsebri sub-*wereda*, Welqayt *wereda*. Like any massive undertaking of this kind, the Welqayt Irrigation Project is expected to affect the society, the culture, the livelihood as well as the environment of the whole area and its direct environs. For this reason it is necessary to assess its impact as well as document the history, culture and livelihood of the area before the implementation of the project. Already in 2008 Mekelle University staff had started a first research in Mezega, which yielded historically and culturally interesting discoveries (such as the above-mentioned 300-year-old Gondarine castle and also traces of one disappearing language).

Due to the planned irrigation and dam project, Mekelle University organised a new research. The preliminary data assessment for this was carried out in June this year (22 June – 1 July 2012), with the geologists, historians, social anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists and heritage experts Habtom Gebremedhin from Dilla University, Yohannes Gebre Selassie from Paris University I - Sorbonne, and Fesseha Berhe, Yohannes Aytenew and Hiruy Daniel from Mekelle University, under the direction of the ethnohistorian Dr Wolbert Smidt, Mekelle University. Collaboration with other researcher groups and international partners, as with government agencies and administration and civil society stakeholders, is currently under preparation.

As has become a tradition in Ethiopia, major development projects are preceded by research by independent scholars, to study the livelihood and heritage of the concerned areas. In this case, the first findings are very promising. From a scholarly point of view, important new insights into the long history of Ethiopia are to be expected. The research project focuses on three aspects:

(1) Documentation of heritage sites and opening them up to tourism, from palaeohistorical sites to ancient ruins. One example for this is the already-mentioned Gondarine castle, situated on a hill. It will not be directly affected by the future lake, but will constitute a perfect spot for tourists interested in Gondarine history and the beauty of the landscape.

(2) Documentation of the culture and history of the diverse peoples of the region. The research group started documenting the last memories of local lowland populations, which include the already-mentioned remains of two moribund languages. One, until 2008 unknown, was identified as being related to Gumuz; the other language thus far has no known relatives. Historical memories reflect a complex migration history of the region, from Muslim pastoralist and semi-pastoralist groups in ancient times, lowlander groups belonging to diverse Nilo-Saharan peoples, up to Christian Ethiopian highland

settlers starting from the time of King Bekaffa, and Muslim Saho semi-pastoralists who have been settled there for almost a century.

(3) The third aspect is the study of the livelihood of the people living in the concerned area. Many of them will have to totally change their life style and livelihood. The researchers of Mekelle University believe that it is their duty to not only document the history and culture of the region, but document the daily lives of the people in order to be able to identify their potential strengths and weaknesses and offer improvements in their lives under the new circumstances. This includes projects of improvement of local oil seed production in areas not affected by the new lake, which is already now assuring a stable income to the inhabitants of the area. Other concrete low-scale projects from which private households may benefit considerably are envisaged. This research project will include documentation of the heritage of all religious sites and will, in close cooperation with the communities, look for ways to preserve these heritages and help to keep their place within the community. (Principal Investigator: Wolbert Smidt, Department of History and Cultural Studies, Mekelle University).

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Multidisciplinary Mekelle University Research and Training Project in Mifsas Bahri, Hashinge Lake, Tigray

Discussions in 2011 with the Mekelle University administration regarding capacity building in archaeology, particularly with Prof. Dr. Joachim Herzig and Dr. Kindeya Gebrehiwot, the Institute of Paleoenvironment and Heritage Conservation (IPHC) and the College of Social Sciences and Languages (CSSL), led to the suggestion of a pilot study in the Hashinge Lake area, where locals had reported findings of carved stones from an ancient building. It was decided to set up an archaeological capacity-building project ("Test Excavation and Training in Archaeology and Heritage at Mifsas Bahri, Southern Tigray") in combination with further projects on oral tradition, manuscripts and ethnological linguistics of the area. The main archaeological project was submitted by the office of the vice-president of academics to the ARCCH in August 2012 after preparations by Aklilu Habtu (IPHC director) and the social anthropologist Alula Tesfay (IPHC), in collaboration with Wolbert Smidt (CSSL, then Research Council), who had persuaded the Sudan-archaeologist Steffen Wenig to start an archaeological project at MU with a strong capacity-building component.

The archaeological project is described as follows: Unlike Aksum and its environs, not much is known about the archaeological heritage of southern Tigray. Towards the downfall of the Aksum Empire, the power center is believed to have shifted south, towards the wider Lalibela area. Although not

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much is known, the site of Mifsas Bahri fits into the supposed movement of this power center, and thus has high archaeological importance. The site of Mifsas Bahri, situated directly at Hashinge Lake, is known to us only through a preliminary study which sufficed to establish its great archaeological importance (Tekle Hagos). In addition, the site is known through field trip reports by Paul Henze (unpublished). The preliminary work on the site has shown that it is in all probability a very important Aksumite site. As the site lies open and exposed and is thus potentially endangered, it needs to be considered what future excavation shall be undertaken, including possible future conservation works. As the site is deteriorating, continuation of the preliminary research is urgent. Until now, the findings of the first research have not been published in detail, with the exception of a short overview in Amharic by Tekle Hagos. Therefore, the team leader Professor Steffen Wenig will assure the thorough documentation and publication of all findings. The involvement of several professionals under the guidance of Professor Wenig is part of a policy of Mekelle University to train their own staff in order to acquire experience. The work will concentrate itself on the site at the Hashinge Lake. However, as the site must be understood in its context, a rough survey will be undertaken on foot in its direct surroundings. The collected materials will be sorted, labeled and described, both through sketches and photographic documentation. The catalog will be put into an electronic file, and will also be made available on paper. (Principal Investigator: Prof. Dr. Steffen Wenig, Humboldt-Universität Berlin / Mekelle University¹).

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Deciphering and Analyzing the Cultural Heritages of Mai Mekden / Addi Me'ar Sites in South-Eastern Tigray

The village of Addi Me'ar and its surroundings are located north of Mekelle, near the town of Mai Mekden. It is a site of archaeological and historical ruins suggesting long and continuous settlement (as early as the Aksumite period) in the area. The preliminary field survey generated data that led us to conclude that the area might have historical significance and deserves systematic investigation. As our study revealed, there is a strong local oral history tradition that links the locality to prominent religious figures, such as *Abune* Ye'asay (said to have been a Roman Emperor who abdicated his throne out of remorse for his actions and migrated to Mai Mekden, according to local sources) and *Abune* Ewostatewos (a local monk-saint who migrated to

¹ For the duration of the first phase of this pioneer project Prof. Wenig is hired as full professor at Mekelle University, with base in the IPHC, at the Palaeoenvironment and Anthropology Research Centre, teaching and collaborating at IPHC and CSSL, with a successor to be named after the first phase.

Armenia in the fourteenth century CE). Moreover, the hagiographies and ethnographic evidence are indicators of the change and continuity in the history of the area. Hence, there is a need to link archaeological research with oral tradition and ethnographic research in order to understand the area's past.

In spite of the fact that the locality has significant potential for historical and archaeological research, little or no work has been done so far to uncover its past. In addition, at present, many of the archaeological and historical sites are facing natural and human-made disasters. Historic terraces are being stripped of their stones and turned into cobblestones and shipped out to Mekelle and other major urban centers for road construction. In addition, the riverbank close to *Abune Ye'asay's* church has become vulnerable to soil erosion. In fact, a portion of the embankment has partially collapsed, thereby endangering the structural stability of the church itself. Thus, this research project will conduct archaeological, oral history and ethnographic research in an attempt to reconstruct the history of the area. Moreover, it will identify ways of documenting, preserving, managing and concomitantly empowering the local communities, who will be actively involved in the project. In this three-year research project, experts from various fields and departments, namely History & Cultural Studies, Heritage Conservation, Earth Sciences, Biology, LaRMEP and Architecture & Urban Planning, will take part. These experts will employ multidisciplinary methods and techniques, such as Preliminary Survey, Ground Survey, Geo-Physical Studies, Excavation, Interview, Observation, GIS Processing, Genealogy, DNA Analysis, Philological Analysis, Pollen Analysis and Carbon Dating in their investigation. (Principal Investigator: Ayele Bekerie, Department of History and Cultural Studies, Mekelle University).

Background Information on the Journal

Technical and other standards

A transliteration standard for the Ge'ez [Gǝ'ǝz] script has been developed, which is easy to use also for those who do not have special signs and rare diacritica in their computers (see the table in the beginning of the Journal). The chosen system is close to the usual, but yet non-standardized writing patterns of Ethiopian or Eritrean names or words in Latin letters. But different from the often inconsistent daily way of writing names in English (often changing the spelling of the same words or names within one text, while in the original writing system it has a fixed orthography), the chosen system remains linguistically exact, and thus corresponds better to the highly evolved orthography of the Ge'ez [Gǝ'ǝz] script. The chosen system closely follows the example already set by Rubenson's eminent collection of original documents, the *Acta Aethiopica*, but avoids special signs not easily available in modern standard fonts. However, we do not aim at an over-standardisation, as each authors belong to their own tradition. For example the style used at the *Institute of Ethiopian Studies* (IES) and by the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, preferred especially by philologists, is a well-established system, which may also be followed.

Also in the case of bibliographies and referencing we decided to leave some freedom to the authors, as long as the chosen standard remains exact and consistent. The careful reader will notice that – depending on the discipline of the author – the bibliographies show differences especially in the formats of names. This constitutes, in fact, one of the biggest technical challenges: Some disciplines, especially those close to the natural sciences, have established the rule that first names will be abbreviated, which has the effect that in some cases the name of address of Ethiopian names (i.e., the first name) is erroneously shortened, and the father's name used as reference, which makes the author often un-identifiable. This constitutes quite a challenge for making bibliographies consistent – at the end some differences remain. In any case, we generally demand standardized bibliographies at the end of each article.

Articles can be submitted online, and articles published in previous issues are accessible in the internet. This will assure that articles published in this Journal can be read more widely also by those who do not have access to hardcopies.