

When ethnolinguistics breaks out of academia

A Report from Africa and international cooperation

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Abstract. After having been relegated to the austere halls of academia for centuries, in the last decades human sciences have more and more frequently been called to get mixed up with the outside world. With its focus on people and on their relations, anthropology (Appadurai 1996; 2014; Latour 2006; 2012) has represented one of the most brilliant examples of the fruitfulness of this evasion, specifically in the field of international cooperation (Olivier de Sardan 2005; Fassin 2012). In this report I will try to argue that, in a multi-disciplinary perspective, a joint anthropological and ethnolinguistic approach to the field can be very productive. An attentive and well focused lexical mapping of specific domains, can in fact help to significantly reduce the time anthropologists usually spend in data gathering through participant observation and face to face interviews. This approach seems particularly useful when funds are object-driven and the time scheduled for the analysis of the context quite insufficient. I will try to demonstrate this thesis through the discussion of two case studies: 1. a preservation project among the Ogiek communities of the Mau Forest in Kenya, and 2. a medical project designed for the Hamar and Dhaassanach peoples of Ethiopia.

Keywords: Ethnolinguistics, Anthropological linguistics, Hamar, Dhaasanach, Ogiek

Introduction: methodological interactionism and a place for ethnolinguistics

While hard sciences, in a way or another, have always had their place in the world outside academia, the place reserved to human sciences seemed to coincide, until quite recently, only with the erudite dissertations held by scholars along university hallways. If brought outside the university, the issues discussed by humanists represented most of the times just that exotic taste useful just for keeping the party alive.

It was only between the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX centuries that things started to change. Thanks to the positivist philosophy of science and to the birth of

sociology, the concern about human rights and human dignity obliged the leading classes to interrogate themselves on issues as social equity or welfare.

In the same period, thanks to figures like Sigmund Freud and Maria Montessori, psychology and pedagogy became concrete fields of interaction between the academic discourse and the true life of people. It was, in fact, more or less in those times that the label “social sciences” happened to be used for the first time.

It can roughly be said that anthropology found its place as an applied science just after the chain of events that characterized the colonial era, WWI and WWII, when anthropologist Glynn Cochrane, after the publication of his book *Development Anthropology* in 1971, was called as an advisor by the World Bank. Soon afterwards, Cochrane's report *The Use of Anthropology in Project Operations of the World Bank Group*, dated 1974, become a “must read” for economists and tycoons all around the globe.

From that moment, and above all during the last 20 years, public and development anthropology became pivotal for understanding, supporting and managing complex contexts where the pressures of globalization impact the most on minority groups or deprived or stigmatized peoples. Arjun Appadurai (1996; 2014), Bruno Latour (2006; 2012), Jean Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2005), David Mosse (2005), Marc Edelman and Angelique Haugerud (2005), Christiaan Grootaert and Thierry van Bastelaer (2002) and finally Didier Fassin (2012), just to mention some of the most known, have in recent times very clearly and fruitfully described and discussed this relatively new applicative perspective.

In addition to this, also the dialogue between humanities and hard sciences is recently getting more and more frequent and promising, and the encounter between technicians and anthropologists is finding its place in the management and implementation of popular technical knowledges.

As a matter of fact, doing cooperation on the field means being obliged to discuss and work with many different parties: technicians on the one hand, who are performance-driven, local people on the other hand, whom, most of the times, are seen just as recipients of the technicians' action, and external funding agencies, whose main interests are obviously linked to money.

In this framework, the social scientist is usually perceived as a mediator and, in order to be an efficient mediator, he needs to be able 1) to understand all the parties' perceptions, projections and expectations; 2) to make the different parties harmonizing their respective interventions with those of the others.

It is thus not by chance that Olivier de Sardan (2005: 32-34), whom I take as my anthropologist of reference in the field of development and cooperation, has seen in multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity and transversality three of the most important factors for a more productive approach to the field .

More specifically, Olivier de Sardan (2005: 23) sees a very close interaction¹ between anthropology and sociology, stating that, in the field of development:²

¹ J. P. Olivier de Sardan (2005: 21) speaks clearly of methodological interactionism, borrowing the term *interactionism* from the Chicago School of sociology and clearly declaring his liking towards «Blumer's symbolic interactionism or Goffmann».

² Which constitutes «a specific domain within anthropology and sociology» (Olivier de Sardan 2005: 23).

Anthropology and sociology cannot be separated, much less opposed. This is especially true in the case of a certain type of anthropology and a certain type of sociology, as long as we are willing to admit that these two closely related social sciences have nothing to do with essayism, philosophy, ideology or speculation, but are, on the contrary, the result of field enquiry, that is to say, the end product of rational procedures of empirical research.

I have spent much time as an advisor and researcher in development projects throughout Africa, and I totally agree with Olivier de Sardan on this point and, following this openness to methodological contamination (or better, *interactionism*).

My aim in this brief report is to underline even more the benefits of inter-disciplinarity on the field and to demonstrate that adding ethnolinguistics to anthropology and sociology in the planning and managing of development projects on the field can reveal itself particularly appropriate and enriching.

A methodological implementation, with the adoption of an ethnolinguistic analysis of the context through a scrupulous and well focused use of lexical mapping of specific domains, can in fact help to significantly reduce the time usually spent in data gathering.

After the identification of crucial knots of interest through the lexical mapping, which usually does not need more than a couple of days to be completed, a consequent, in depth socio-anthropological analysis can, in fact, be carried out going straight to the point. This results particularly useful when funds are performance-driven and the time scheduled for the analysis of the context insufficient.

In order to clarify my point, it is probably important to define here a bit more specifically the main characteristics and aims of the modern ethnolinguistic methodology.

If we can trace the history of ethnolinguistics back to its origins in the Heidelberg School of Hugo Schuchardt and Rudolf Meringer, whose thesis were divulged through the review *Wörter und Sachen*, (1909-1937; 1938-1944), there is no doubt that, since then, its methodology and approach to the field has changed a lot.

Born as a branch of etymology, specifically applied to unwritten languages in the framework of Indo-European studies, the newborn discipline had the aim to gather empirical documentation of unwritten languages through the use of specific grammatical and lexical questionnaires. Far from being a mere collection of words, the linguistic data had, then, to be understood inside their own contexts and systems of reference. Therefore, a scrupulous analysis of the cultural framework in which the language was spoken was regularly carried out, pointing out the cultural value of any single object or concept, its possible ritual implications, its conditions of use and all other relevant details.

Specifically, in Italy this approach revealed itself largely productive in the field of dialectology and brought to the launch of very interesting programs, mainly during the '70s, '80s and '90s, some of which as, the ALI, *Atlante Linguistico Italiano*, are still ongoing³.

³ See the ALI - Atlante Linguistico Italiano - founded in 1924, promoted by the Società Filologica Friulana G. I. Ascoli, associated to the chair of Linguistics of the University of Turin, and co-ordinated by Matteo Giulio Bartoli, which had its apex in those years, and which is still ongoing today: <http://www.atlantelinguistico.it/il-progetto.html>

Born inside this school, more modern ethno-linguists as Giorgio Raimondo Cardona, Franco Crevatin and Alessandro Duranti (the latter now active in the USA) represented the propulsive force of the discipline in our country⁴.

In the meanwhile, during the second half of the XX century, in the USA another meaningful step forward was moved by the discipline, thanks to scholars bound to the Boasian School and its cultural relativism. It was in fact in the USA that a parallel discipline, the so-called “ethnoscience” made its first appearance. Ethnoscience, in a clever definition by Atran (1991: 650) was that discipline which tried to look at culture with a scientific perspective.

Ethnoscience as Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1999), for example, looked for a scientific way to penetrate and easily define a specific cultural system from the inside, and identified in lexicography their principal tool of investigation. In those days the scholars’ interest was attracted mainly by taxonomies and popular systems of categorizations, with the biased belief to dispose of a series of blank forms, — e.g. the botanical kingdom, the animal kingdom, the domain of emotions, the colours etc. — which should simply be filled by experts with indigenous labels, in order to get a mirror of the indigenous worldview and systems of thought. However, this over-simplistic view bumped very soon into the wall of reality and ethnoscience lost its appeal a few years later its birth.

Be it as it may, it was only thanks to the evidences of the failures of that time, that the Pandora’s vase disclosed, and it became finally clear that a linguistic approach, without a due consideration of the cognitive implication hidden behind any languages, could be misleading.

Thanks to neuro-linguistics and cognitive studies, nowadays we know, in fact, that each language is strictly connected with the shaping of the brain and the construction of the personal and the social mind⁵. Therefore, understanding a specific popular worldview is not only a matter of documenting covered or uncovered labels, but of putting together stimuli perception and decryption, in the construction of one’s *niche* or *microcosm*, borrowing the term from the interdisciplinary field of neuro-sciences⁶ or from Claudio Magris’s *Microcosmi*.⁷

Treasuring this history, made of past experiences, intuitions, biases, failures and steps forwards, the modern ethnolinguistic approach, tries to describe the *others’* experience of being-in-this-world, still starting from a lexical documentation of specific domains, but with the awareness that there is no way to grasp it in a truly objective, or “scientific” way.

In this perspective, it is no longer possible to consider a word (or its non-existence) as an isolate item, but each word must be considered in all its networks of relations, becoming in itself a *relational category* (Gentner, Kurtz, Kenneth 2005) A relational category is something that exists thanks to, and because of, its context, it is something which is shaped, and at the same times can shape, its context.

⁴Linguistic questionnaires for the description of unwritten languages are still the main tool used by linguists doing descriptive linguistics on the field. See for example Bouquiaux, L., Thomas, J. M.C. 1992. *Studying and describing unwritten languages*. Dallas. The Summer Institute of Linguistics.

⁵ See on this Tim Ingold (2011), Maurice Bloch (1998), Michael Tomasello (2001), just to cite the most known.

⁶ See for example the two Handbooks edited respectively by Alain Berthoz & Yves Christen 2008 and Dirk Geeraerts & Hubert Chuyckens 2007 (further references inside).

⁷ Garzanti 2009.

Therefore, the meaning of a word can only be understood when it is possible to understand the kind of relations it is able to en-act or de-act inside its specific setting in a given moment in history.

In the framework of this interdisciplinary effervescence, ethnolinguistics is now an experimental field in which linguists feel free to contaminate their methodology with the typically anthropological (participant) observation, to adopt a cognitive reading of their data, and to use, at least in my case, a Lacanian psychological perspective to interpret them.

Language, brain and mind are too strictly interconnected, to be thought as single, separate units.

With all this as a premise, the activity of what I call here “lexical mapping” becomes a true picklock, with which it is possible to get straightforward to the identification of the social, economical, ecological, medical, ethical, etc. world of relations the referent of each single word (be it a person, an object, an idea, or a concept) has inside its own cultural niche.

In this sense, applying this methodology to the field of development can help to reduce the time spent in data gathering on the field: far from substituting activities such as (participant) observations or face to face interviews it enables the researcher, in fact, to identify very quickly the “hot potatoes” which he/she needs to analyse and deal with, in order to envisage appropriate solutions for a good cooperation.

In order to give the reader evidence of this mechanism, I will now present two case studies in which this approach was used and where its adoption revealed itself a winning strategy.

The first case refers to a preservation project carried out among the Ogiek communities of the Mau Forest in Kenya by three different NGOs (NECOFA Kenya, a Kikuyu lead organization based in Molo, whose main concerns are agronomy and the restoring of the original forest cover, ManiTese, an Italian NGO whose main interest lays in the promotion of the younger generations and Ethnorêma, another Italian NGO based in Bolzano, whose aim is the preservation of endangered languages and cultures) in which I was involved in 2013 and 2014.

The second case refers to a medical project carried out by the Italian NGO Doctors with Africa CUAMM, whose main concern is the health of mothers and children, in South Omo Region, Ethiopia in 2015-2017.

Case 1: Among the Ogiek of Mariashoni, Kenya

The Ogiek of Mariashoni are a group of encapsulated delayed return hunters and gatherers living in the Mau Forest Eastern Escarpment in Kenya. They constitute the Morisionig sub-family of the Kenyan Ogiek group. This sub-family is made of 7 different clans which differentiate itself from other two sub-families, nominally the Tyepwerereg, made of 11 clans, and the Gypohorng'woneg, 5 clans (Muchemi, Ehrensperger 2011).

According to the 2009 Kenyan census, the Ogiek total number in Kenya is ca 79.000, but the ethnic population is less than 20.000. The Morisionig sub-family should roughly count 8.000 people.

The Ogiek language has been classified by Rottland (1982) as a branch of the Kalenjin, Nilotic-Southern, Nilo-Saharan group, and it has at least three different variants: Kinare, Sogoo and Akie (the latter spoken in Tanzania).

According to the Ethnologue (Rottland 1982), the Ogiek language is nowadays ranked at level 7 of the EGIDS scale, i.e. in trouble, with poor intergenerational transmission.

However, according to the results of the socio-linguistic survey I made in Mariashoni in 2013 (Micheli 2014), at least in this region the situation is completely different and the language is still very lively, with still some Ogiek monolingual speakers and only about 5 percent of people able to understand and speak English.

My work among the Ogiek of Mariashoni was inserted in a multidisciplinary project promoted by three stakeholders:

NECOFA⁸ Kenya, a local NGO whose main concerns are the preservation of the indigenous flora and the restoration of the original forest cover through different activities, like the building of tree nurseries, the implementation of traditional technologies (e.g. beekeeping, firewood consumption and the like) and the implementation of traditional food habits;

ManiTese, an Italian NGO interested in human rights, working for the promotion and care of women and younger generations,

Ethnorêma, another Italian NGO, strongly committed with the preservation of endangered languages and cultures around the world.

Being an expert in linguistic documentation, it was in the framework of Ethnorêma's activities that, at first, I was involved in this network.⁹ My work on the field in Mariashoni lasted approximately five months, between December 2012 and February 2013 and end December 2013 and February 2014.

However, our collaboration is still ongoing and a first grammatical sketch and short vocabulary of the language are now in print, as one of the scientific results of it¹⁰. During my first stay, while I was doing all the 143 interviews for the socio-linguistic assessment published in 2014, I started my documentation work beginning with one of the domains more crucial for the Ogiek and for NECOFA in that specific moment, i.e. beekeeping.

I did so, following Olivier de Sardan's suggestion to invest, above all in projects aimed at implementing something already existent in the community, working in a field where a local Popular Technical Knowledge (PTK) already exists, and which already represents for sure a knot of interest for our interlocutors.

Accompanied by Catherine Salim and Victor Chiris, the only two youth of the community who could understand and speak a quite fluent English and act as translators for me, I had the possibility to visit some of the community elders at their locations,¹¹ interviewing

⁸ Network for ECO-Farming in Africa.

⁹ My research activity was inserted in the FIRB 2012 "ATRA" funded by MIUR - the Italian Ministry of Universities and Research.

¹⁰ The *Grammatical Sketch and Short Vocabulary of the Ogiek Language* is currently in print by EUT the University of Trieste Press as the 4th vol. of the ATRA series.

¹¹ Mariashoni is not a true village, the Ogiek still use to live in separate households, where a maximum of 20 people belonging to the same family — parents and children plus some son's wives until they give birth to their

them, seeing and documenting their activities through pictures and voice-recordings, in order to compile a cultural lexicon of beekeeping¹². That first activity with the community elders impacted very positively on the whole multidisciplinary project and on the further activities proposed by NECOFA and the other stakeholders.

As a matter of fact, it seemed, indeed, that from that moment on, the relationships between the Ogiek community and the project managers became more relaxed and confidential. Until that moment, in fact, despite their irreproachable ethical behavior, and despite their evident interest in a real policy of people's empowerment and involvement, the operators of NECOFA and ManiTese were still felt as foreigners by the Ogiek community, more interested in technical issues than in people's promotion.

My intervention, which did not have an immediate and clear technical aim, was evidently perceived by the Ogiek as the demonstration of a welcome repositioning of the operators, who finally moved their attention from the technical issues to the building of a true human relation with the Ogiek community *tout-court*.

In brief, this new interest in the Ogiek language, in their traditional ways of doing things and understanding and interacting with their ecological niche, made the Ogiek feel noteworthy for the first time.

In addition, understanding that their popular technical knowledge was seen by the stakeholders not only as a memory of a past to be preserved, but above all, as the starting point for an intelligent, context-specific implementation of the beekeeping sector, respectful of tradition and traditional values, made them develop a new sense of pride in their identity as Ogiek.

In order to understand this passage, it is probably useful to remind that the Ogiek were historically considered a parasite community of the Maasai and they were called with the derogatory term *dorobo*, which literally means "nain" in Maa, and which was used by extension to indicate the Maasai servants or slaves.

The Ogiek have always lived with this stigma. Therefore, this outsiders' attention towards them was as much unexpected as reassuring. As a consequence, this moved them to express the will to establish in Mariashoni an Ogiek cultural center, which could bring them in the network of the "eco-villages" proposed to foreign tourists by tour operators such as Terra Madre, which in Kenya works in close connection with NECOFA.

Far from representing just an easy bait for getting in touch with the communities, and rise their sense of self-respect and identity, bringing the Ogiek to reflect on their own cultural lexicon has been important also for highlighting which part of the Ogiek popular technical knowledge could be easily preserved and revitalized in Mariashoni and which part, instead, was on the point of getting lost forever.

Languages, in fact, usually preserve intact a memory of traditional activities and beliefs much longer than their true *practice* in daily life itself.

This is for example the case of hunting, or traditional medicine. In this fields it was possible to gather a reasonable number of Ogiek words, still present in the memories of the elder generation, which, however, did not find any more a true counterpart in the

first babies. Each household lays at least at some hundreds meters, or a couple of kilometres from the next one, even though they all belong to the same Morisionig group.

¹² The results of that work have already been published in Micheli 2013.

local environment. I could, as a matter of fact, gather a list of names of trees, plants and animals¹³ and discuss with the elders their effective practical value, their usages and their functions in traditional medicine, but unfortunately it was impossible for me to identify them according to the scientific taxonomy or to obtain their translation into English or Kiswahili.

Sad to say, but due probably to the effects of deforestation, those species simply do no longer exist in that habitat.

This apparently negative experience was however useful for NECOFA's experts in order to have an idea of the size of the probably irreversible effects of climate change on the region. These data could anyway be used for envisaging appropriate future interventions for the restoration of the original forest cover.

Working with lexical mappings is sometimes useful also for understanding how much a people's "mythological" identity corresponds to real facts.

As a traditional Hunters and Gatherer society, the Ogiek are obviously proud of their ability in hunting¹⁴. When I was collecting the Ogiek vocabulary of hunt, we came to an issue that really puzzled my elders informants. We were discussing the existence of age-sets for hunters and everybody agreed that, of course, the Ogiek had specific names for different hunters' age-classes.

Be it as it may, when I questioned them about those names, my informants started to quarrel with each other. At first, they discussed the issue together with me, but, when it appeared clear that they did not have an univocal answer for me, they started to feel embarrassed. Finally, the eldest hunter, visibly irritated, asked me to let them alone for a while, in order for them to discuss the issue privately and then come back to me with an agreed upon answer.

Their discussion lasted the whole afternoon. In those few hours, they called other elders from the neighbouring locations and went on discussing until evening, when they finally came to me with a very interesting list of terms, at least considering it from a linguistic point of view.

The list is resumed in the following table:

Age	Kipsigis	Ogiek
16 +	kemɲige	rambau
60 +	kaplelaɲ	sogwe*
90 +	korɔŋoro	iɲendgere
100 +	sɔgwoyɔt*	illegen
150 +	bʊlʊ? **	***oldiyegi
200 +	manek	***olmerotorot
250 +	ɲɔŋɛ	***olderito
300 +	koosigo	***ɔlbeles

¹³ I refer the reader to Micheli *in print* for these words.

¹⁴ For a description of the Ogiek hunting knowledge see Micheli 2016.

First of all it is interesting that, probably in order to retrace the number of and the differentiation between the different age sets, they had to seek help from Kipsigis, a neighbouring language spoken by a farming society, whose members, however, used to hunt and to organize themselves in hunting parties when the season was good.

Secondly, no one of the Ogiek words proposed is transparent in Ogiek and, no one of my informants referred me about the existence of a secret or sacred language.

Thirdly, the morphological shape of the last four Ogiek classes let us think of a Maasai origin, given that the prefixed morpheme *ol-* in Maa represents a determinative article.

Last but not least, the second class, *sogwe*, in Ogiek, has morphologically the shape of a neutral nominal basis, with the *-ot* singular suffix¹⁵, i. e. *sogwoyot*, which is proposed in the table as the fourth Kipsigis class.

I have already discussed this table in Micheli 2016, but what I feel important to add here is that I am pretty sure that it was right in that day that the elders of Mariashoni finally realized that their “traditional culture”, their very same identity, was becoming just a vague idea lost somewhere in the memories of ancient times and no longer practiced.

That acknowledgment and the discussions that originated from it, brought the Ogiek of Mariashoni to agree with NECOFA and ManiTese on an implementation of their activities targeted to the safeguard and promotion of their “original” identity.

Case 2: Among the Hamar and Dhassanach communities in South Omo, Ethiopia

Treasuring my experiences among the Ogiek of Kenya, I decided to apply the same combined anthropological and linguistic methodology to my new field, when I was involved, in 2016, in a project of medical cooperation in the region of South Omo in Ethiopia by the Italian NGO Doctors with Africa CUAMM, whose aim was the restoration of Health Centres and Services, especially for mothers and newborn babies of the two Hamar and Dhaasanach *woredas* of the region. The project was funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and planned in agreement with the Ethiopian Ministry of Health.

The majority of the funds was reserved to the concrete restoration of old Health Centres and other facilities like maternity clinics and first aid posts. Therefore, the basic idea was to apply the common schemata providing services in fixed, permanent places, to which the local communities were supposed to refer in case of need. However, that model was partially unfitted for those quite introverted, illiterate, non sedentary communities, like Hamar and Dhassanach.

The region of South Omo, located in the South Western part of the country, bordering Kenya and Lake Turkana, in a habitat which ranges from the green hills of the highlands between Arba Minch and Jinka to the moonlike arid desert of the Dhaasanach area, around Omorate, is one of the poorest in Ethiopia. The population of the region is composed by a mosaic of different ethnic groups (Ari-Banna, Mursi, Nyangatom, Dime, Kwegu, Karo, Hamar-Banna and Dhaasanach) each of which speaks its own language and in large part is illiterate both in English and Amharic.

¹⁵ The same as in Ogy-*ot*, lit. “an Ogiek person”.

Since, according to the most recent data available, it resulted clear that the worst response to maternity services until that very moment, was a peculiarity of the Hamar and Dhaasanach *woredas*, I was involved in the project, specifically for gathering information and understanding the conditions of these tribes.

According to the census of 1998, the Hamar-Banna ethnic population counted in those times 42.838 people, 38.354 of whom were monolingual Hamar, while of the 32.064 censused Dhaasanach, the monolingual were 31.368. Hamar-Banna is an Omotic (Afro-Asiatic) language, for which a first grammatical description was published by Petrollino (2016), while Dhaasanach is a Cushitic (always Afro-Asiatic) language, whose description was published in 2001 (Tosco 2001).

Both Hamar and Dhaasanach are pastoralist nomadic people and herd cows. They are patrilineal and practice polygamy. While the Hamar live usually in single households which can be far from each other even some kilometres, the Dhaasanach live instead in village-like, quite stable, communities. In both cases, girls get married very early after their first menstruations, but, while after marriage for the Hamar girls it is quite impossible to meet again with their original female relatives (mother and sisters), for the Dhaasanach ones this is instead very common. A Dhaasanach girl can, in fact, get married with a man who lives in the same village-like camp of her original family. The Hamar ecological niche is much richer in vegetation and water than the Dhaasanach one.

In both *woredas* the people's response to the health services offered was low, and in particular it was so when coming to maternity facilities and women's health. The worst situation, however, was registered in the Hamar area. Of course, the reasons for this were to be looked for in the position of women in the Hamar context, already very well described by Jean Lydall and Ivo Strecker in 1979.

Nevertheless, according to the data published by Elfmann in 2005 concerning Dhaasanach women, even in this case the situation was not really reassuring.

On the basis of this preliminary knowledge, and given the very short time at my disposal (three weeks only) for my fieldwork in the two *woredas*, in order to gather as many useful data as possible, I decided to visit five different locations in Hamar and five different villages in Dhaasanach, in order to discuss with women alone about their life, starting always from the lexical mapping of specific domains, analyse the results emerged and then prepare a schema for structured interviews to be used for verification, eventually by the CUAMM's operators alone once I would have been back to Italy.

The lexical field mapped were:

- Taxonomy of women's life stages;
- Terminology referred to the different wives in the polygamous family;
- Terminology of food given to the babies during breastfeeding and weaning;
- Terminology of social roles (masculine and feminine) in the family / clan / village.

Due to space constraints, I will discuss here only the first table:

	Hamar	Dhaasanach
Child	naanu	marti
Adolescent	ansanu	nyakhataran* after <i>neyra</i> and <i>d'immi</i>
Bride	uta	nyakhataran
Woman/Mother	uta* even though barren	minni only after having delivered a baby
Widow	ma k'ambi	minni

All the words gathered were extensively discussed with all the women met in the different households and villages, in order to have a clear idea of their *cultural* and *practical* meaning.

As anthropology teaches, speaking of age classes, each change in terminology corresponds to a change in social status and in the expectations, roles, possibilities a society recognizes to its members.

Now, left aside childhood, looking at the table, the first divergence lays in the meaning and duration of the second passage in the two societies.

Admitted that for both Hamar and Dhaasanach “adolescence” represents a very short period in life, characterized by the need to find a husband at soonest,¹⁶ in Hamar it is shorter than in Dhaasanach. In Hamar, just after the first menstruation, an *ansanu* can get married without any further delay. In Dhaasanach a girl can become a *nyakhataran* even before her first menstruation. Dhaasanach celebrate this passage through the performance of the clitoris excision (*neyra*) which is usually done only once every two or three years for all the girls of the same village-like settlement. Therefore, sometimes it happens that even baby girls or, on the contrary, girls who are having their periods already since some months, undergo this rite together. After *neyra*, in order to be ready for their marriage, *nyakhataran* have to pass also through another ceremony, the *d'immi*.

D'immi is a ceremonial banquet offered to the whole community by the fathers of all the excised girls in order to present them to possible partners. The participation to the *d'immi* requires two things: 1) that the girl has already had her first menstruation; 2) that her father pays his own quote to the village for the banquet to be prepared.

This means, *in practice*, that sometimes between the *neyra*, if this is done some months after the girl's first menstruation, and the *d'immi*, if this is done some months or year later than the *neyra*, even a couple of years can pass, and in the meanwhile the girl can become more adult.

As a consequence, while Hamar girls at the age of 13 or 14 are already married, Dhaasanach girls usually get married around 17 and this means, for example, that they can have a slightly safer first pregnancy.

¹⁶ Both in Hamar and Dhaasanach there is the practice of the brideprice and families are happy to give out their daughters at soonest in order to get her bride wealth.

The further passage is *bride-hood*. Again, the table shows us a neat difference.

Hamar brides are immediately called *uta*, which means “woman, mother”, and the same terms applies both to mothers and barren women, while Dhaasanach brides are at first called *nyakhataran* and only after their first delivery they are called *minni*, “woman, mother”.

This differentiation is crucial in order to understand the relative freedom of Dhaasanach brides as compared to the Hamar ones. When a Hamar *ansanu* gets married, in fact, the husband’s family immediately pays the whole brideprice (a certain number of cows, goats etc.) and, therefore, they have immediately a complete control over the girl, who, in case of barrenness, becomes a servant of the whole extended family.

On the contrary, when a Dhaasanach *nyakhataran* gets married, the husband’s family pays just the necessary for the feast and offers a simple gift to the bride’s parents. The true brideprice is paid step by step at any new baby the woman bears.

Therefore, until she becomes a mother, the *nyakhataran* is also free to leave her husband and go back to her own family and this is usually accepted with no consequences by both families.

Last but not least: widows.

In both societies, levirate is the rule but, in both cases, if the woman is old enough and one of her son is already married, she can decide to live with him without joining her husband’s brother. In Hamar, this is true only if the woman is no longer in her reproductive age: *ma’kambi* is the taxon indicating Hamar widows in this conditions. A *ma’kambi* is even free to manage her own pocket money. It is probably not by chance that the only Hamar children (girls in particular) of whom I know they are attending school, are widows’ children.

Summing up in brief, from this single table, the CUAMM staff could understand:

one of the reasons why mother and newborn mortality rate in Hamar is higher than in Dhaasanach (age of the mother at her first pregnancy);

some of the reasons why it is easier to get in touch with Dhaasanach women than with Hamar ones (a closer solidarity network among women, due to the residence style, to the ties bond between girls during the *neyra* and the *d’immi*);

that, especially in Hamar, the easiest way to involve women in medical trainings or in other activities is to refer either to their husbands, or directly to widows.

Conclusions

In conclusion, through the two case studies presented, I hope to have succeeded in demonstrating how in a multi-disciplinary perspective, a joint anthropological and ethnolinguistic approach to the field, with an attentive and well focused lexical mapping of specific domains, can help to reduce the time anthropologists usually spend in data gathering through participant observation and face to face interviews. Far from being a substitution of these activities, the lexical mapping is here proposed as a practical tool aimed at identifying in a very short time (a couple of days) the most interesting

cultural points on which a consequent in-depth socio-anthropological analysis should be focused. This approach results particularly useful when time constraints are cogent, which is unfortunately still the rule in many international cooperation projects on the field in developing countries.

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