

**ATrA**

*Aree di transizione linguistiche e culturali in Africa*

**1**



Impaginazione  
Gabriella Clabot

© copyright Edizioni Università di Trieste, Trieste 2016.

Proprietà letteraria riservata.

I diritti di traduzione, memorizzazione elettronica, di riproduzione e di adattamento totale e parziale di questa pubblicazione, con qualsiasi mezzo (compresi i microfilm, le fotocopie e altro) sono riservati per tutti i paesi.

ISBN 978-88-8303-750-4 (print)  
ISBN 978-88-8303-751-1 (online)

EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste

via Weiss 21 – 34128 Trieste

<http://eut.units.it>

<https://www.facebook.com/EUTEdizioniUniversitaTrieste>

# Materiality and Identity

Selected papers from the proceedings  
of the ATrA Conferences  
of Naples and Turin 2015

Ilaria Micheli (ed.)

with the contributions of Ilaria Micheli,  
Franco Crevatin, Ilaria Incordino,  
Gianni Dore and Moreno Vergari,  
Dario Nappo, Gianfrancesco Lusini



# Table of contents

- ILARIA MICHELI  
7 *Introduction: Identity “Matters”.  
Chasing Identity. Looking for coherence  
among a sense of the self, the group, the  
outsiders and a proper lifestyle in one’s  
microcosm and in areas of transition*
- FRANCO CREVATIN  
17 *Micromondi*
- ILARIA MICHELI  
57 *Materiality and Hunt among the Ogiek  
of Mariashoni (Kenya)*
- GIANNI DORE, MORENO VERGARI  
93 *Identità, ibridazione e evoluzione  
dell’abitare tra i Saho di Eritrea e  
Etiopia*
- ILARIA INCORDINO  
125 *Hunting in the emergence  
of ancient Egyptian state*
- DARIO NAPPO  
137 *Il sistema doganale dell’Egitto  
romano alla luce della evidence  
documentaria*
- ILARIA INCORDINO  
149 *Foreign aromatic products  
in the cultural and religious  
identity of ancient Egypt*
- GIANFRANCESCO LUSINI  
157 *Dinamiche identitarie  
nell’Etiopia antica e medievale*



# Identity “Matters”

Chasing Identity. Looking for coherence among a sense of the self, the group, the outsiders and a proper lifestyle in one’s microcosm and in areas of transition

ILARIA MICHELI

Università di Trieste, imicheli@units.it

## *Abstract*

In each and every discourse on issues such as contact, evolution, transition, migration, integration and encounter, identity plays a central role. Being a manifold, uneasily describable object in itself, identity represents a very difficult object of study and many scholars from different disciplines of the human sciences (psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and linguists) have tried in recent years to give their contribution to the debate born around it. In the two meetings organized in Naples, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 and Turin, October 8-9<sup>th</sup> 2015 in the framework of the ATrA project, the issue has been discussed by archaeologists, linguists, philologists and anthropologists specifically adopting the perspective of observing and discussing identity through a reflection on its material manifestations in transitional contexts (be it in terms of language, of economical exchanges or of traditional handicraft). This book is a collection of selected papers from those meetings.

## *Keywords*

Identity theory, Materiality, Transition

## 1 – INTRODUCTION

Identity “matters”, no doubt. Even though it is something so evanescent that it changes unexpectedly in the very moment in which you, as a scholar, are sure to have a clear and stable image of it in your head, it still matters. It still matters because it still represents something that determines personal and group choices and behaviors in every human exchange, and you, as a scholar working in the field of the human sciences cannot but deal with it and with its manifold manifestations.

In this introduction I will first of all try to trace a very brief synthesis of the various interpretive lines which have characterized the major studies on identity from the second half of the last century until the beginning of the new millennium. In the final part of this introduction I will instead trace the new theories and perspectives on identity as an even more complex phenomenon in areas of linguistic and cultural transition, which have emerged during the development of the ATrA project from March 2013 until October 2015.

## 2 – IDENTITY AS A COMPLEX ISSUE: MAJOR APPROACHES AND THEORIES

Since the very first approaches to the theme made by social scientists, very strong connections between the two concepts of self and group identity have been underlined. In any observation of specific case studies, the one could not go without the other and, therefore, it appeared clear that no theory about identity could be shaped without a specific reflection on the implications, relations, impositions and possibilities created by the specific cultural dimension in which the subject was born or happens to live.

Again we find ourselves in a very dangerous field, because “culture” is another term which, like “identity”, does not refer to something static, and again, any cultural trait can be modified and is continuously modified by human actors through their contacts and relationships with outsiders for the satisfaction of political, economic or social needs.

In this sense, in the late '70s and early '80s of the last century, two opposite perspectives provoked a very animated debate whose aftermath resist until now. The first approach was the culture bound approach, proposed by Bakhtin<sup>1</sup>, who believed that personal and group identity are strongly shaped by the culture in which the single or the group are born. In this perspective, culture is seen as something which tends to replicate itself. The second approach was the constructivist model proposed by Lévy-Strauss<sup>2</sup>, who believed

---

<sup>1</sup> Bostad F., Brandist C.; Evensen L. S. (2004) *Boakhtinian Perspectives on Language and Culture. Meaning in Language, Art and New Media*. UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>2</sup> Lévy-Strauss C. (1977) *L'Identité*. Paris: Grasset.

that even culture is influenced and constantly shaped and re-shaped by what happens in a specific context and period of time.

Besides, both schools had forcedly to cope with the findings of the Russian cognitive approach by Vigotzky and Lurija, who, already in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrated how the specific ecological, material, cultural and linguistic environment can influence not only the speakers' ideas about themselves, but also the very way in which they shape their minds and ways of thinking<sup>3</sup>.

All this brought to the conclusion, since the very early stages of identity studies, that the ultimate word on the matter is yet to come.

If we try to handle the problem from another perspective and to consider identity focussing on the building up of a single person for him/herself or in his/her relations with his/her social context, again we find ourselves in front of a double choice: shall we choose the internal/psychological approach or shall we pay major attention to the external/social dimension?

The most representative thinkers of the first approach have undoubtedly been E. H. Erikson in the '50s<sup>4</sup>, who has been the first scholar using the term "identity crisis", and G. H. Mead in the '60s<sup>5</sup>. According to Erikson, a person goes through eight different stages during his/her life and the passage from one to the other always implies the resolution of an interior conflict. The eight stages are thus characterized by eight conflicts as follows: stage 1 (age 0-1) conflict 1 (basic trust vs basic mistrust); stage 2 (age 1-3) conflict 2 (autonomy vs shame); stage 3 (age 3-6) conflict 3 (purpose, initiative vs guilt); stage 4 (age 6-11) conflict 4 (competence, industry vs inferiority); stage 5 (age 12-18) conflict 5 (fidelity, identity vs role confusion); stage 6 (age 18-35) conflict 6 (intimacy vs isolation), stage 7 (age 35-60) conflict 7 (generativity vs stagnation) and stage 8 (age 65 +) conflict 8 (Ego integrity vs despair). The most delicate phase is represented by stage 5, which corresponds to adolescence and is the period in which the EGO can decide to adhere to the model proposed to him/her by his/her culture/society/family restraints or to refuse it and try another way. The role confusion eventually emerged in this phase can easily lead to alienation and marginalization.

George Herbert Mead was the theorizer of the division of personal identity between two actors: "I" and "ME". In Mead's idea the "ME" represents what the subject learns in interaction with other people and with his/her environment, while the "I" represents the EGO's most natural impulses. The role of the "ME" is to discipline the "I" so that the "I" does not break the law of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Vigotzky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological functions*. Cambridge, MA: HUP.

<sup>4</sup> Erikson E. H. (1968-1994) *Identity: youth and crisis*. W.W. Norton Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Mead G. H.; Morris C. W. eds (1967) *Mind, self and society*. Chicago.

community. The “I” is the creative part of the person, and its limits are traced by the “ME”. Summing up, the “I” is the creative reaction of the individual to the attitude of the community.

If we try to handle identity as an issue concerning mainly the person in his/her external/social dimension, we cannot but cite the SIT – the Social Identity Theory – developed by H. Tajfel in the early '60s<sup>6</sup>.

According to this theory a subject's social identity is shaped through three different processes: 1. categorization (the subject creates a world of categories, based on distinct factors such as age, gender, social position and the like, tending to maximize the differences in order to have a clear idea of the general structure of his/her own society); 2. identification (the mechanism according to which the subject identifies the belonging of people or of him/herself to one specific category); 3. Social comparison (the subject continuously compares his/her being in or out of a specific community with a model characterized by the evaluation bias of his/her own group). It is inside this theory that the concept of Situated Identity has been formulated: a subject's identity is in fact not a monolite and in every situation he/she can assume characteristics of one group or another, in order to facilitate social interaction (an Italian is Italian when he interacts with a German, while he becomes a Piedmontese or a Sicilian when confronted, let us say, with a Roman).

Keeping these grand theories in mind, many other scholars have expressed new ideas on the delicate issue of identity shaping and negotiation. Considering all of them, we can now try to make a list of the most meaningful elements that need to be added to what we have already said.

The list could be the following:

1. Ethnicity, another blurred and uneasily describable factor. According to Barth (1969: 9), in fact: “categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual histories”<sup>7</sup>. Other important factors in the shaping of ethnic identity are morality (Epstein 1978) and age (Phinney 1989). According to Phinney, it is again adolescence the moment in which a subject starts to think about his/her (ethnic) identity and this is the period in which the subject starts to experience the effects of discrimination for the first time. Adolescence is therefore the most delicate period in ethnic identity evolution.

---

<sup>6</sup> Tajfel H. (1974) “Social Identity and intergroup behaviour” in *Social Science Information*, XIII, 2, pp. 65-93.

<sup>7</sup> Barth F. (1969) *Ethnic groups and boundaries*. Oslo: Bergen.

2. Language. It must be noticed that the role of language as a fundamental factor for ethnic identity is much discussed in extra-European contexts, above all in Africa, where the romantic equation one nation – one land – one language is quite inconsequential<sup>8</sup>.

3. Role and gender (Erikson – note 4 – We have already seen it above).

4. Habitus. Central to any consideration about identity shaping and negotiation is the idea of habitus, expressed for the first time by the sociologist P. Bourdieu<sup>9</sup> in the early '70s. According to Bourdieu most of the culture of a group is not passed handing down abstract knowledge, but repeating and imitating practical actions, in handicraft for example, in agriculture and the like. All these common practices form the *habitus* of the group, and, in a sense, its cultural identity. In this book we will see how brilliant this intuition was and how it can still be applied to identity studies today, from a *material* perspective (see the contribution by Crevatin, Micheli and Dore-Vergari)

5. Strategic Interaction. The term strategic interaction has been proposed by the sociologist E. Goffman in the '70s<sup>10</sup>. Goffman sees social interaction as a tactic game, in which strategy is crucial. Strategic interaction is the response of a subject to his/her counterpart, who becomes a sort of opponent. In this game all the subjects (or players) are supposed to play consciously for their own advantage.

6. Stigmas and stereotypes. The importance of these last elements has been stressed and explained by B. Major and L. O'Brien in 2005<sup>11</sup>.

Given the extreme complexity of the issue “identity”, is it yet possible to simplify it, for example, providing a visual representation?

Could we describe it as a point on a continuum?



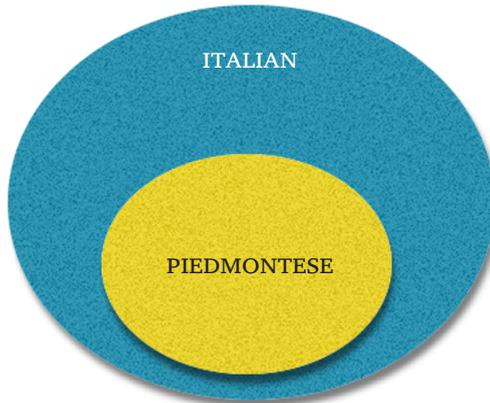
<sup>8</sup> Edwards J. (2009) *Language and Identity*. Cambridge: CUP.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu P. (1972) *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Genève: Droz.

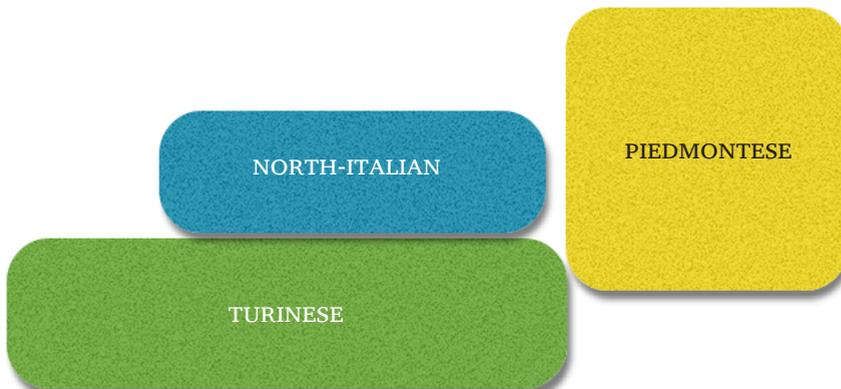
<sup>10</sup> Fundamental for identity studies is Goffmann E. (1961) *Encounters: two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Company.

<sup>11</sup> Major B.; O' Brien L. (2005) “The social psychology of stigma” in *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56: 393-421.

Or shall we represent it through a diagram?



Or as a heap made of different stones?



Looking at the three suggested solutions, we can see that none suffice for the purpose. The problem of all these tentative representations is their fixity. The most important and persistent characteristic of identity is in fact, as we have seen, its mutability.

What is necessary is not only a multidimensional perspective, but also an attentive observation of the processes and mechanisms caused by single subjects and/or groups coming in contact with one another.

The most promising theories focussed on this aspect brought to the definition of the following models:

1. Collective Identity. We owe this definition to A. Melucci (1989)<sup>12</sup>: “collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientation of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their actions take place”. In Melucci’s idea, the shaping of a collective or group identity is to be seen as a process of negotiation between three parts: cognitive definition (of different group models), active relationships (between groups) and emotional investments.

2. Identity Fusion. With this term, Swann, Gomez et al., in 2009<sup>13</sup>, deal with the extremely delicate theme of the more or less conscious joining of a new, often idealized group, which can happen to a single subject who has fallen outside his/her original family. In this process, new members experience a visceral sense of oneness with the group. According to this theory a clear distinction between the personal self and the social self remains and access to the group is obtained through the following principles: a. *agentic personal self principle* (even though identity-fused individuals become strongly aligned with the group, they are assumed to maintain an active personal self, even when the social self is activated); b. *identity synergy principle* (personal and social selves can be activated independently and they may combine in synergy to motivate pro-group behaviors – other members of the group are perceived as “kins” even though they do not have any contact with each other); c. *irrevocability principle* (fusion will remain largely stable over time despite difficulties). This theory seems to apply very well to all fundamentalisms.

3. Multiple Identities. This definition has been proposed by P. G. Burke in 2009<sup>14</sup>. According to Burke, a multiplicity of different identities, which are, so to say, equally latent in the subject when he/she is not involved in social interaction, can be contemporarily activated when needed. The one can prevail over the other or be submitted to it according to the actual situation. The actual problem is not that of the prevalence of a single identity over the others, but rather the adherence of the identity one decides to play in a given situation with the values of the people involved in it.

4. Liquid Modernity. Last but not least, this definition by Z. Baumann<sup>15</sup> brings us directly to situations with which the ATrA project is very familiar, i.e. identity in areas of very quick transition. In contexts characterized by liquid modernity, people have increasing feelings of uncertainty and are

---

<sup>12</sup> Melucci A.; Keane M.; Mier P. (1989) *Nomads of the present. Social movements and individual needs in contemporary society*. Temple University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Swann W. B.; Gómez A. et al. (2009) “Identity fusion: the interplay of personal and social identities in extreme group behavior” in *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Burke, P. G. & Stets J. E. (2009) *Identity Theory*. New York: OUP.

<sup>15</sup> Baumann, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Polity.

submerged in a chaotic continuum of situations which they struggle to understand and many times cannot grasp at all. The liquid, modern man, is a nomad in his own life, obliged to change not only places and occupations, but also values and beliefs, if he does not want to be totally marginalized. The core problem of liquid modernity is the pace at which everything moves, which does not allow people the time to adapt to new situations.

### 3 – IDENTITY IN AREAS OF TRANSITION AND THE POSITION OF THE ATRA PROJECT

If, as we have seen in this introduction, facing the issue of identity is always a difficult task, I think we will agree that facing it in the most unstable of all social contexts, i.e. in areas of linguistic and cultural transition, is even more difficult. Moreover, any additional problems due to the peculiarities of transitional areas are to be given specific consideration.

These peculiarities are:

1. Contacts between different ethnolinguistic groups are often overwhelming and unfair (consider, for example, the case of the Ogiek Hunters and Gatherers treated by I. Micheli – chapter 3 in this book).

2. The natural and social environment of indigenous people collapses (consider the case of the Saho treated here by Dore-Vergari – chapter 4).

3. Tradition and *Habitus* loose their importance as paradigms.

4. Internal, psychological and external social tensions and conflicts can, therefore, grow out of control.

In areas of transition, where very often weak minorities are threatened by all the factors listed above, there is of course no easy way to safeguard their rights to have, develop and promote their traditional identity in terms of culture and language.

The only means of obtaining some respectful treatment for these peoples are:

1. a conscious process of negotiation between ALL the different actors involved;

2. a great deal of group/personal creativity and adaptation by ALL the actors involved;

3. external intervention on behalf of the supervising authorities, in order to make the parts communicate;

4. appropriate government policies inclusive and respectful of minorities.

The key words are dialogue and respect.

Dialogue and respect are based on knowledge.

The ATrA project aims at spreading knowledge in order to make dialogue and respect a true option.

This book is a collection of selected papers from the two meetings organized in Naples, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 and Turin, October 8-9<sup>th</sup> 2015 in the framework of the ATrA project. On these two occasions the issue of identity has been discussed by archaeologists, linguists, philologists and anthropologists specifically adopting the perspective of “materiality”. Identity has thus been analyzed through the study of the group’s “material manifestations”.

The innovative aspect of this perspective is the fact that, in our opinion, “materiality” refers to every kind of human experience in and with the surrounding environment (see chapter 2 by Franco Crevatin, with a good definition of the concept of “Micromondi” – “Microcosms”) and it is not to be confined to material culture (see chapter 3 by Ilaria Micheli on the Ogiek of Kenya, chapter 4 by Gianni Dore and Moreno Vergari on the Saho of Eritrea and Ethiopia and chapter 5 by Ilaria Incordino on hunting in Ancient Egypt), even though material culture is of course a part of it. Other important factors, that we can consider as material elements, are economic exchanges (see chapter 6 by Dario Nappo on the customs in the Roman Province of Egypt and the Red sea around the I century a.C. and chapter 7 by Ilaria Incordino on the availability and use of African aromatic products in ancient Egypt) and of course, language and style in written traditions (see chapter 8 by Gianfrancesco Lusini on identity dynamics in ancient and medieval Ethiopia).

The case studies presented in this book confirm that the dynamics ruling the shaping and negotiation of identity has always been the same throughout different times and places and that the same framework of interpretation can be valid both in modern and ancient contexts, in technologically advanced or traditional societies.

*People of different religions and cultures live side by side  
in almost every part of the world,  
and most of us have overlapping identities  
which unite us with very different groups.  
We can love what we are, without hating what – and who – we are not.  
We can thrive in our own tradition, even as we learn from others,  
and come to respect their teachings.*  
Kofi Annan

## BASIC REFERENCES

- BARTH, F. ed. (1969) *Ethnic groups and boundaries*. Oslo: Bergen.
- BAUMANN, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Polity.
- BOSTAD, F., BRANDIST C., EVENSEN, L. S. (2004) *Boakhtinian Perspectives on Language and Culture. Meaning in Language, Art and New Media*. UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1972) *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Genève: Droz.
- BURKE, P. G., STETS J. E. (2009) *Identity Theory*. New York: OUP.
- EDWARDS, J. (2009) *Language and Identity*. Cambridge: CUP
- EPSTEIN, A.L. (1978) *Ethnos and identity: three studies in ethnicity*. London: Aldine Transactions.
- ERIKSON, E.H. (1968-1994) *Identity: youth and crisis*. W.W. Norton Publishers.
- GOFFMAN, E. (1961) *Encounters: two studies in the sociology of interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Company
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, C. ed.(1977) *L'identité*. Paris: Grasset.
- MAJOR, B., O'BRIEN L. (2005) "The social psychology of stigma" in *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 56:393-421.
- MELUCCI, A. (Keane J., Mier P. eds 1989) *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*. Temple Univ. Press.
- MEAD, G. H. (Morris C. W. ed. 1967) *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago.
- PHINNEY, J. (1989) "Stages of ethnic identity in minority group adolescents" in *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 9, 34-49.
- SWANN, W. B. JR., GÓMEZ, A. et al. (2009) "Identity fusion: The interplay of personal and social identities in extreme group behavior" in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96.
- TAJFEL, H. (1974) "Social identity and intergroup behaviour" in *Social science information*, XIII, 2, pp. 65-93.
- TURNER, R. (1968) "The self-conception in social interaction" in *The self in social interaction* (C. Gordon & K. Gergen), New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 93-106.

Finito di stampare nel mese di luglio 2016  
EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste