

The Latest Salt Caravans: The Chinese Presence between Danakil and Tigray: Interdisciplinary Study to Integrate Chinese and African Relations in Ethiopia: Analyzing Road Evolution and Ethnographic Contexts

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Abstract : The aim of this project is to study the Chinese presence in Ethiopia, in the area between the Saba River and the Coptic areas of the Tigray, with detailed documentation of the Danakil region, from which the salt pickers caravans departed; the study was created to understand the relationships and consequences of the Chinese advance in these areas, inhabited by tribes linked to ancient, still practiced religious rituals, and home to unique landscapes and archaeological sites. Official estimates of the number of Chinese in Africa vary widely; on the continent, there are increasingly diverse groups of Chinese migrants in terms of language, dialect, class, education, and employment. Based on this and on a very general state of the art, it was decided to increase the studies on this phenomenon, focusing the attention on one of the most interesting countries for its diversity, cultural wealth, and for strong Chinese presence: Ethiopia. The study will be integrated with interdisciplinary investigation methods, such as landscape archeology, historiographic research, participatory anthropology, geopolitics, and cultural anthropology and ethnology. There are two main objectives of the research. The first is to predict what will happen to these populations and how the territory will be modified, trying to monitor the growth of infrastructure in the country and the effects it will have on the population. Risk analyzes will be carried out to understand what the foreign presence may entail, such as the absence of sustenance for local populations, the ghettoization of foreigners, unemployment of natives and the exodus of the population to the capital; the relationships between families and the local population will be analyzed, trying to understand the dynamics of socialization and interaction. Thanks to the use of GIS, the areas affected by the Chinese presence will be geo-referenced and mapped, delimiting the areas most affected and creating a risk analysis, both in desert areas and in archaeologically and historically relevant areas. The second point is to document the life and rituals of Ethiopian populations in order not to lose the aspects of uniqueness that risk being lost. Local interviews will collect impressions and criticisms from the local population to understand if the Chinese presence is perceived as a threat or as a solution. Furthermore, Afar leaders in the Logya area will be interviewed, in truly exclusive research, to understand their links with the foreign presence. From the north, along the Saba river, we will move to the northwest, in the Tigray region, to know the impressions in the Coptic area, currently less threatened by the Chinese presence but still affected by urbanization proposals. There will also be documented the Coptic rituals of Gennà and Timkat, unique expressions of a millennial tradition. This will allow the understanding of whether the Maoist presence could influence the religious rites and forms of belief present in the country, or the country will maintain its cultural independence.

Keywords : Ethiopia, GIS, risk perceptions, salt caravans

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