

Report on prof. Giorgio Banti's (Oriental University of Naples) field mission to Khartoum and Kassala (4 – 23 November 2013)

1. Aim

The purpose of G. Banti's mission was to gather new data on the Nara language (also known as Barea or Barya) from north-western Eritrea. Even though this language has been introduced in school teaching in Eritrea during the last twenty years with a Latin-based orthography, and there are now several books that have been published in it, it is badly underdescribed, e.g., the most recent grammatical description is an 11 pp. long sketch (Thompson E. D. 1976. "Nera", in Bender M. L. ed. *The Non-Semitic languages of Ethiopia*, 484-494. East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University). Scholarly interest in the Nara language has been growing during recent years, since when Claude Rilly, the well-known specialist of Meroitic, has shown that Meroitic belongs to a sub-group of Nilo-Saharan languages that he has called Northern East-Sudanic: it includes Meroitic, the Nubian group, Nara, and a few other more distantly related languages such as Tama and Nyimang. A more thorough scientific knowledge of Nara is thus not only important in itself, but is also quite relevant for the comparative study of Meroitic, and of the relationships between the western part of the Eritrean and Ethiopian plateau and the lowland areas. G. Banti had already started to collect data on Nara in 2010 in Asmara, but he didn't have an opportunity for going back to Eritrea after that.

2. Time-table of the mission

Since it is known that in and around Kassala there are several Eritrean refugees, and there is a well-established archaeological mission from the Oriental University of Naples in Sudan and, particularly, to the region of Kassala, G. Banti asked the colleagues of that mission, and particularly A. Manzo, to travel to Kassala together with them. Travel permissions were obtained through the kindness of the Sudan National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM).

On his arrival in Khartoum on the 4.th November, G. Banti met Claude Rilly in his office, as well as officials from the NCAM on that day and the following ones. On the same day H.E. the Italian Ambassador in Khartoum gave G. Banti a few contacts with the Italian Cooperation and the UNHCR. The purpose of this was to obtain help in finding native speakers of Nara among the refugees in Kassala and, if possible, already in Khartoum. These contacts were quite fruitful, and G. Banti could start working on the 11th November with two groups of Nara informants: two speakers of the Mogoraayeb dialect and one speaker of the Hikir dialect. From the 11th to the 14th November he could thus record 16 hrs of linguistic interviews with the two groups of informants. He also got from them the necessary names and phone numbers for contacting other informants in Kassala, as well as the two ^Cumda's, i.e., chiefs, of the Nara who live in that town. In addition to this, the UNHCR had suggested that he should get in touch with their sub-Office for Eastern Sudan in order to find native speakers of Nara in the refugee camps of the Kassala region.

On Friday, the 15th November, G. Banti travelled to Kassala, in order to reach A.

Manzo and the other members of the Italian archaeological mission who had already gone there. In the mean time, Dr. Habaab of the Kassala branch of the NCAM had also kindly suggested that G. Banti should contact the *Cumda*'s of the Nara.

Once in Kassala, he met the two *Cumda*'s and the head of the UNHCR Sub-Office, and was thus able to organize his work for that week in Kassala. He thus met several times groups of informants for three of the four dialects of Nara: Mogoraayeb, Higur and Koyta, recording a total amount of 6 hrs on Koyta, 10 hrs of further recordings on Higur, and 10 hrs on Mogoraayeb. One of the two *Cumda*'s kindly made it possible for him to meet two singers, an elderly and a young one, who performed several Nara traditional songs, in order to enable him to document not only their ordinary spoken language, but also the language of their traditional oral literature. When in Kassala, G. Banti prepared a small targeted questionnaire for guiding his interviews with the Nara informants. This questionnaire includes both grammatical data, and all the major lexical meanings that have also been secured for Meroitic, in order to secure the much needed comparative data.

On the 22nd G. Banti left Kassala and travelled back to Italy during the night between the 22nd and the 23rd.

Giorgio Banti