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JASs cover story

Starting from this volume, the front cover of our Journal will present a photograph of a study which has recently been published by members of the Istituto Italiano di Antropologia. A brief and informal description of this research will be given in the new section JASs cover story.

African Pygmies, a more complicated tale

Everyone knows that Anthropologists are continuously in search of characters which make humans different and, even more, of the micro-evolutionary reasons behind the biological variation of our species. Therefore, the special interest generated by African Pygmies in our field of research is hardly surprising. In fact, these populations are strikingly different from many others in one of most noticeable external characters, stature. African Pygmies are also peculiar from socio-cultural point of view, being one of the few living populations which still base their subsistence economy on hunting and gathering.

Not everyone is conscious, on the other hand, of the fact that our perception of biological human variation is mostly based on geographical proximity. We are very good at identifying geographic origin when looking at individuals who traditionally live close to us. On the other hand, we are much less able to perceive differences among persons coming from other continents or distant areas. A seemingly logical consequence of this common way of looking at human diversity is that many people believe that individuals who share characters which are atypical and different from ours must have a "common origin". Thus, thinking that the different Pygmy groups living in Central Africa must have a common origin would probably be very natural for many people of European origin.

The idea of a common origin of African Pygmies, which in evolutionary terms translates into a recent evolutionary separation, is also familiar to many Anthropologists and Population Geneticists. In fact, the Bantu expansion, which occurred 3-4,000 years ago, has been mostly seen as the factor which broke a relatively homogeneous population background with Pygmies and Bushmen occupying most of the sub-Saharan Africa. The study we have recently published tells a more complicated tale¹. Based on the analysis of the hypervariable region-1 of the mitochondrial DNA and a reanalysis of Y-chromosomal data, we have proposed that Eastern and Western Pygmies separated not later than 18,000 years ago. According to this study the divergence between the two main groups of African Pygmies arose during their prehistory, rather than being simply the consequence of relatively recent processes of population expansion. This ancient separation could explain not only the differences among African Pygmies regarding the mitochondrial DNA and the Y-chromosome, but also their variation of some physical characters. Another implication of this study regards the long time debated issue of the adaptation of African Pygmies to the hot and wet tropical forest climate. Again, our study challenges the most widespread and simple explanation for the resemblance of Pygmy populations inhabiting Central Africa, which says that they developed their common complex traits before their separation. In fact, by providing evidence of an ancient separation between Eastern and Western Pygmies, our study reopens the old fashioned issue of an independent adaptation of African Pygmies to the tropical forest.

¹ Destro-Bisol G., Coia V., Boschi I., Verginelli F., Caglià A., Pascali V., Spedini G. & Calafell F. 2004 - The analysis of variation of mtDNA hypervariable region-1 suggests a separate evolutionary history between Eastern and Western Pygmies. *Am. Nat.*, 163:212-26.

Editorial

New ideas for an old journal

After ninety-four years the *Italian Institute of Anthropology (ISItA)* is changing the title of its official publication from *Rivista di Antropologia* to *Journal of Anthropological Sciences (JASs)*. The change of the title is one of a series of other important modifications. A part of the Journal will be published online and it will be possible to submit manuscripts directly as e-mail attachments. The layout of printed pages is completely new and the cover has been redesigned with an image which will change every year. Finally, two independent web pages will be available for the *JASs* and the February 2005. In the former, the full text of some recent papers will be made freely available. In the latter, the readers will find a short historical outline of our Institute, instructions of how to become members, timely information on the scientific meetings along with an archive of books, journals and monographs possessed by the *ISItA* and pictures submitted by *ISItA* members. What is the logic behind all these changes and innovations? Certainly, we hope that the new look will make the Journal more attractive for both readers and authors. However, the reasons are not only aesthetic. The use of English in the main title is paralleled by the choice of English as the only language in which manuscripts can be submitted, the only exception being for contributions produced for a strictly Italian audience. This should help the Journal increase its readership. The image on the new cover will serve to present the research activity carried out by the members. Through the launch of the online publication, we hope the Journal will manage to establish a much more frequent contact with readers and potential authors, while the consideration of manuscripts sent by e-mail will shorten the editorial process considerably. However, all these changes will not modify the philosophy of our Journal which will maintain a strong attitude towards a multidisciplinary approach to Anthropology. This is expressed also by the new title, where the plural form "Anthropological Sciences" is to acknowledge the existence of different approaches in Anthropology and to auspicate their communication, with the final goal to develop an integrated view of evolutionary processes.

We would appreciate any suggestions, comments and criticisms regarding and invite all our readers to send them to isita@uniroma1.it

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