

The importance of hidden stories

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We live in an increasingly globalised world, where geographical barriers seem to dissolve under the weight of digital connectivity and the seemingly limitless production and distribution of goods. With our smartphones, we can virtually visit distant metropolises, see things that have happened in any corner of the world, and buy things we did not even know existed until recently. We feel like citizens of a planet without borders, where everything is both different and the same. It is an illusion that surrounds us and gives us a pleasant feeling of freedom and wealth: everything, even the most distant or extravagant, is within reach of the eye, the ear and, if necessary, the hand. It all seems so easy and satisfying, almost as if it were the work of magic. But... let's take a moment to breathe and ask ourselves a question: if we look beyond the surface of this limitless web, can we not see something important that is in danger of being lost, something whose value does not depend on visibility or the likes it manages to get?

If, as some argue, what makes us truly human is the ability to create and transmit stories through which we elaborate and realise new visions of the world (Bruner 1991; Damasio 1999; Tomasello 1999), it is precisely these that we should look at. Not only the best known and celebrated ones, but also the hidden ones, the heritage of less numerous and little-known communities. Coming to our country, such as those that Article 6 of the Constitution calls 'linguistic minorities', groups that populated Italy long before the migratory flows that have occurred since the 1970s. The word 'minorities' should not mislead us; they

are by no means secondary realities, because the importance of human groups is not measured by the number of people that make them up. It is grasped by knowing their past and their present, imagining their future too, in the knowledge that the plurality of voices and ideas form the beating heart of our composite humanity. Just as each individual represents the vital element of every community, thanks to his or her unique wealth of life experiences, values and skills cultivated over time. At the end of the day, each of us inevitably embodies a minority, but this certainly does not diminish the value of our existence.

We can delve into the meaning of the history of groups, which we will therefore call 'minorities', by referring to the purely demographic aspect, by studying their languages, traditions and cultures, but also by exploring unexpected sources of information such as DNA; our genetic material can shed light on past events that have left their mark on biology but have no place in written documents or oral accounts. In an age when the Internet seems to erase physical and cultural distances, embracing and protecting the richness of human experience becomes both an act of cultural resistance and a way of honouring the great heritage of our species' diversity in all its irreducible complexity (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2010).

In a country like Italy, historically home to a great diversity of languages (e.g. Orioles 2003; Toso 2006, 2008; Consani, Desideri 2007; Autelli et al. 2024; Autelli et al. in print) and DNA (Capocasa et al. 2014; Fiorito et al. 2016; Raveane et al. 2019; Anagnostou et al.

2024), the legacy of encounters between peoples from distant lands since antiquity, this discourse should find a receptive audience. Unfortunately, things are going in a different direction. Apart from the largest and best-known groups, such as the Sardinians and the Friulians, few people know about the Arbëreshë, the Occitanians, the Tabarchins and others, apart from hearsay. They are barely mentioned in schools and universities, and very little in the mass media. And even when they are mentioned, it is easy to fall into the trap of describing them as remnant groups, small islands lost in a sea of considerable linguistic homogeneity. Where diversity, if it exists at all, is at the regional level, or worse, is denigrated by the old, tired stereotypes of ‘North versus South’.

Building upon the insights gained from the ‘Italian Bio-Cultural Atlas’ project and the paper ‘From the Alps to the Mediterranean and beyond: genetics, environment, culture and the “impossible beauty” of Italy’ (Anagnostou et al. 2023), the volume “**Gli Italiani che non conosciamo. Lingue, DNA e percorsi delle comunità storiche minoritarie**” (Destro Bisol et al. 2023) aims to highlight the rich tapestry of Italy’s historical minority communities. By exploring their languages, cultures, DNA, and food traditions, the book seeks to challenge stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of these often-overlooked groups. A central goal of this project is to amplify the voices of these communities, allowing them to share their unique perspectives and experiences. By doing so, we hope to dispel misconceptions and demonstrate the dynamic and resilient nature of these groups, which have actively participated in the social and demographic changes of the world. Ultimately, this book strives to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society that recognizes the value of cultural diversity.

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