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AFALULA
AGENCE FRANÇAISE
POUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT
D'AL-ULA

الهيئة الملكية لمحافظة العلا
Royal Commission for AlUla



Postdoc contract (18 months): Ethnoecology, oasis of al-'Ula (Saudi Arabia) M/F

Ecological knowledge and know-how of communities in al-'Ulā oasis region, Saudi Arabia.

KEY INFORMATION

Affiliations CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique)

Project al-'Ulā AS : Anthropological survey of al-'Ulā community and its oasis system

Research unit UMR 7206 Éco-anthropologie (au Musée de l'Homme, Paris)

CNRS/Muséum national d'histoire naturelle/Université de Paris

Principal advisor for al-'Ulā AS Project Dr. Vincent Battesti (CNRS)

Funding CNRS with AFALULA agency

Start April 1st 2022

Duration 18 months

Application deadline March 24th 2022 — <https://bit.ly/3IGCD8H>

INFORMATIONS CLÉFS

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Unité de recherche UMR 7206 Éco-anthropologie (at Musée de l'Homme, Paris)

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Responsable du projet al-'Ulā AS Dr. Vincent Battesti (CNRS)

Financement CNRS avec l'agence AFALULA

Début 1^{er} avril 2022

Durée 18 mois

Date limite de candidature 24 mars 2022 — <https://bit.ly/3IGCD8H>



Keywords

Anthropology, ethnography, ethnoecology, oasis, Saudi Arabia, agriculture, agrobiodiversity, local knowledge, transmission

Profile and skills required

The candidate must hold a doctorate in social or cultural anthropology, have a good command of the Arabic language, good ethnographic experience and a strong scientific interest in issues related to the relationship of societies to their environment (anthropology of nature, anthropology of the environment, ethnoecology). Skills and/or knowledge in ecology or agrarian systems are desirable. The candidate must also have an interest in interdisciplinarity, particularly ethnobiology and ethnoscience. The candidate will be expected to be independent/autonomous, particularly in the field, although he/she will of course be supervised by the principal investigator.

The candidate will need to be mobile, as he or she will be primarily responsible for conducting extensive ethnographic fieldwork in al-'Ulā in Saudi Arabia (one year fieldwork is expected). The candidate will be based in Paris (Musée de l'Homme, site of the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle). Several trips for conferences abroad are also planned.

Research progress reports should be written in English for the project. A good command of written English is required.

Project description

Mission:

The task of the person recruited for this postdoctoral contract is dedicated to research within the framework explained below. He/she will have to conduct his/her research independently but in concert with the project for which he/she is recruited: the research produced (classically through articles, communications, etc.) will be articulated to that otherwise produced by the project "Anthropological survey of al-'Ulā community and its oasis system" which aims at an anthropological analysis of the oasis region of al-'Ulā, of the functioning of its agroecosystems and of the communities that live in them and build them.

The recruited person will thus contribute to the life of the al-'Ulā AS project overall.

Research:

Located in the northwestern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Medina province, the al-'Ulā oasis is the focus of an ambitious development project by the Saudi kingdom.

The al-'Ulā AS project aims to provide an in-depth study to determine the nature of the al-'Ulā oasis and its social and ecological functioning. Drawing on other oasis cases, it intends not to neglect the local anthropological and ecological specificities and to highlight its social and economic functioning. As such, al-'Ulā is primarily an agricultural terroir, so oasis agriculture and its mode of production deserve special attention (Battesti, 2005), especially the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.), the ingenious species of this complex man-made system (Battesti & Gros-Balthazard *et al.*, 2018, Gros-Balthazard & Battesti *et al.*, 2020). But even beyond the date palm, the oasis presents itself as a real socio-ecosystem and a valuable heritage. It is a combination of a complex multi-layered agricultural system, cultivated species, and local knowledge and practices.



The al-'Ulā AS project therefore aims to understand how this socio-ecological system functions and how it has recently evolved. From a scientific perspective, little is known about the current state of the oasis. To our knowledge, there is no sociological or ethnological analysis of the oasis (other than a book in history published in Saudi Arabia by Naṣīf, 1995, and the analyze underway by the al-'Ulā AS project), nor is there any assessment of the richness of the local agrobiodiversity of plants and animals in the oasis (underway).

The postdoctoral researcher will participate in the al-'Ulā AS project and develop the following themes during the course of her/his research in order to abound to a final general synthesis of the project, in connection with the research conducted in this same project by other social anthropologists (such as Dr. Vincent Battesti, PhD student Léo Marty, and other intervening researchers), but also research conducted in other disciplines within the other projects of AFALULA initiative on al-'Ulā. The choice of priority and secondary research themes for this postdoctoral contract, among the following themes, will be discussed with the principal investigator of the project.

- What are the locally implemented agricultural architectures?

The al-'Ulā AS project is currently working to define an effective typology of oasis farms in the region (from old multi-strata palm groves in polyculture, or old Bedouin picking palm groves to modern and recent palm groves). These are all different social and ecological frameworks, for which the links between agriculture and livestock (stabling, livestock entrusted to a shepherd, cooperation with Bedouin pastoral groups), and the recent transformations of their agrarian systems, for instance, remain to be documented. The relationship between the old palm groves and the new irrigated areas should also be investigated.

- What are the knowledge, techniques, and agricultural practices in this oasis region?

The oasis of al-'Ulā has a complex social organization, composed mainly of different sedentary Bedouin tribes and different old sedentary clans.

Since water resources and the availability of non-humans are not enough to establish an oasis palm grove, it is necessary to document the local knowledge and know-how that are present (ethnobotany, ethnozoology, ethnoecology) and to describe their functioning and administration with all the nuance that the complex local social fabric suggests.

For example, sedentary Bedouin maintain close links with the old pastoral life for some. It is recommended to document these links, to understand what are the grazing areas, etc. In addition, they have often acquired expertise - the nature of which remains to be described - in phoeniculture and oasis agriculture.

Of interest, for example, is the (apparently) recent cultivation of Indian moringa (*Moringa oleifera* Lam.) while there was a pre-existing wild moringa (*Moringa peregrina* (Forssk.) Fiori) farm in the region; also of interest are the past and current dynamics around beekeeping.

- What "traditional ecological knowledge" locally stands for ?

Moreover, the oasis is the subject of a development project (preparing for the post-oil era) that is obviously transforming the oasis world, for which the RCU (Royal Commission for AlUla) is the lead authority. Al-'Ulā had, however, experienced a previous major change in the 1980s with the local redistribution of oil revenues. Radical change? In any case, there has been a radical move from the old oasis city to new comfortable neighborhoods and a replacement of the entire manual (and service) labor force by "expatriates" (from selected



immigration under *kafila* contracts) coming from Sudan, Egypt, India, Pakistan, etc., to work in place of the local Saudis. In fact, we note a decoupling, as it were, between knowledge (the Saudi owners of al-'Ulā) and know-how (the immigrant workers). This raises serious issues about the continuity and transmission of knowledge and know-how related to agricultural activity.

Under these conditions, the evaluation of the loss of this knowledge (if any, and which ones?) seems to be necessary. This also requires studying the functioning of the vertical (between generations) and horizontal (from owners to employees and between employees) transmission of this knowledge, which is a prerequisite for maintaining oasis agrosystems.

- What are the local issues regarding biodiversity and conservation concepts?

The oasis region of 'Ulā has changed and is set to change even more. At a time when "biodiversity" is a major keyword in research projects, a situated ethnoecological review is expected in the case of al-'Ulā, namely to understand what this notion (biodiversity/agrobiodiversity) may refer to in the local systems of thought and practice and how the notion of conservation is apprehended or can be apprehended locally.

Duration of the thesis

The postdoctoral candidate will work under a heightened (18) months postdoctoral contract with the CNRS and will have to complete her/his postdoctoral research in this period. Research schedule will be discussed with al-'Ulā AS Project PI.

Research thematic

Ethnoecology Anthropology, Ethnography.

Mentoring

The postdoctoral researcher will be supervised by the al-'Ulā AS project PI, Vincent Battesti (CNRS researcher, based at MNHN, Musée de l'Homme, Paris: social anthropologist and ethnoecologist, specialist in oases). He or she will benefit from the unique interdisciplinary environment of the Eco-anthropology laboratory of the Musée de l'Homme - in particular within the research team to which he or she will be integrated, "Ethnoecology: knowledge, practices, powers" - and from the rich multidisciplinary environment of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris.

Material and scientific environment (specific safety conditions)

The human and technical resources needed to carry out the postdoctoral fellowship are planned and budgeted for, particularly the means for field research (airfare, per diem, etc.). Remuneration in accordance with the CNRS salary scale according to experience.

This unique opportunity to conduct field research in Saudi Arabia will take place in a secure region of the kingdom, in the northwest, a region that turns to tourism.

Objectives of valorization

- Publications,
- International meetings,



- Possibly contributing to decision-making tools for the development of large projects that will affect the oasis.

Collaborations

This postdoctoral contract provides a unique framework to establish a broad and strong collaborative network, within the host institution, but also with the many research projects funded by AFALULA.

How to apply?

Applications must be sent with a research proposal via the CNRS job website (<https://emploi.cnrs.fr>) before **March 24th 2022**: <https://bit.ly/3IGCD8H> (ref.: UMR7206-VINBAT-003)

Any auditions will take place in Paris or in videoconference within one or two weeks following the closing date for applications.



Photography 1: Working with local people, here an old sedentary landowner in the old palm grove, in al-'Ulā oasis (KSA), April 14th, 2019, by V. Battesti



Photography 2: A demonstration of his Bedouinity during the national celebration of the creation of the kingdom, in al-'Ulā oasis (KSA), Sept. 23rd, 2021, by V. Battesti



Photography 3: In the old Palm Grove, Bengali workers harvesting onions in a bustān (garden) nearby the old city of al-'Ulā oasis (Helf side), April 15th, 2019, by V. Battesti

Links

- RCU (Royal Commission for al-Ula): <https://rcu.gov.sa>
- AFALULA: <https://www.afalula.com>
- CNRS: <https://cnrs.fr/en>
- Muséum national d'histoire naturelle: <http://mnhn.fr/en>
- Musée de l'Homme: <http://museedelhomme.fr/en>
- Lab. Éco-anthropologie (UMR 7206): <https://www.ecoanthropologie.fr>



References

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Battesti, Vincent & Muriel Gros-Balthazard *et al.*, 2018 — « Date palm agrobiodiversity (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.) in Siwa oasis, Egypt : combining ethnography, morphometry, and genetics ». *Human Ecology*, 46 (4), p. 529–546 — online: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01716788>

Gros-Balthazard, Muriel & Vincent Battesti *et al.*, 2020 — « On the necessity of combining ethnobotany and genetics to assess agrobiodiversity and its evolution in crops: A case study on date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.) in Siwa Oasis, Egypt ». *Evolutionary Applications*, 13 (8), p. 1818-1840, doi : 10.1111/eva.12930 — online : <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02375285>

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