



Standing Committee for the Humanities

## **OMLL: The Origin of Man, Language and Languages**

A EUROCORES (European Science Foundation Collaborative Research) programme

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### ***The prehistory of Amazonian languages: Ecological and cultural processes underlying linguistic differentiation (CRP 01-JA17)***

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#### Abstract:

The aim of this project is to synthesize available linguistic, archaeological, historical, and ethnographical information that may shed light on major socio-cultural transformations in the Amazon Basin during the past three millennia.

It will use GIS mapping to correlate existing databases on the diachronic distribution of languages, various aspects of prehistoric material culture, and historical and ethnographical documentation of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. The interpretation of these shifting spatial patterns of distribution will be based primarily not on traditional concerns with the migrations of essentialized "peoples", but on recent theoretical developments in the study of *ethnicity* and *ethnogenesis*.

Language and material culture are understood as vehicles for expressing fluid and contagious cultural identities that should not be confused with populations in a biogenetic sense, and such identities in turn as the products of economic and ecological *niches* within regional systems of exchange. A key issue in the prehistory of Amazonia is the formation of an Arawakan ethno-linguistic identity along many of its major rivers and wetland areas, and the relation of Arawak to upland groups such as Carib, Tukano, and Pano.

An hypothesis to be tested is that the pervasive Arawakan focus on trade, consanguinity, social hierarchy, and sedentary agriculture was a product of this riverine and lacustrine niche in the context of an emergent, pan-Amazonian interaction sphere. The Arawakan languages and their associated cultural institutions suggest the *medium of integration* through which this regional system came into being, beginning in the first millennium B.C.