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Abunä Täklä Haymanot, parete sud del *māqdās*, Wägäriqo, Eritrea. Foto: G. Lusini.

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VOLUME

70

Current Trends in Eritrean Studies

edited by

Gianfrancesco Lusini

NAPOLI 2010

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**The Saho of Eritrea
and the Documentation of their Language and Cultural Heritage**

1. THE SAHO, THEIR LANGUAGE AND THEIR CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Saho speak one of the nine national languages of modern Eritrea, and traditionally live south of Asmara and Massawa down to the Afar depression. In Eritrea they are a linguistic minority of ca. 190,000 native speakers, according to Lewis (2009). Southern Saho dialects are also spoken by ca. 27,000 people belonging to the Irob and a few smaller groups on the other side of the Ethiopian border, mainly in Tigray. Some Tigre-speaking groups like the Mansa^c and the Māryā regard themselves as genealogically related to Saho-speaking clans such as the Tharuuca (Ṭarū^ca)¹ and the Xazo (Ḥazo). In addition to this several ethnically Saho individuals who were born in Ethiopia, in Sudan or in other countries of the Saho diaspora, or even in the major urban centres of Eritrea don't speak Saho as their mother tongue anymore.

The Saho population includes several clans, most of them having their distinctive territories. For the Eritrean Saho these were partly fixed during the early decades of 20th century by the Italian colonial authorities, and consist in narrow bands of land that stretch from the highlands to the coastal plains. Like the Afar, most Saho are Hanafi Muslims; the Khatmiyya Sufi order became quite widespread among them during the late 19th and early 20th century (cf. Miran 2005). However there also are some minority groups such as the Irob clan and some villages around Sancafe (Senafe) and on the Amba Soyra plateau that traditionally follow Orthodox Christianity. Several of them shifted to the Catholic Church during the last two centuries.

The Saho call their own language *Saahot luqha* 'language of the Saho' or *Saahot waani* 'id.'. Afar, that is spoken from south-eastern Eritrea and north-

¹ Saho words such as place, tribal and personal names and other words are spelt here with the official Eritrean Saho orthography. For further details see the Chart of Saho sounds and their orthographic representation in Appendix 1. Whenever necessary, the transcription that is more current in Eritrean and Ethiopian studies in Italy, or a well-known variant spelling, is also provided.

ern Djibouti almost until Dire Dawa in eastern Ethiopia, forms with it the Saho-Afar group of East Cushitic. The origin of the name of the Saho is uncertain, but it is interesting to notice that it occurs with a number of variants in its two neighbouring Ethiosemitic languages, Tigrinya and Tigre: *Sāho*, *Saḥo*, *Šaho*, *Šaḥo*, *Šahu*, *Šoho*. The first European travellers also used a variant with a different vowel, i.e., *Shiho* (cf. Salt 1814). Three major dialect groups are distinguished within Saho: Northern, Central and Southern Saho; Northern Saho is spoken mainly by the Tharuuca and the Casawurta (ʿAsawurta, It. As-saorta), Central Saho by the Minifire and the Dabrimeela, Southern Saho by the Irob and the Xazo. There are considerable phonological differences between Northern and Southern Saho dialects: some of them are highlighted in Appendix 1.

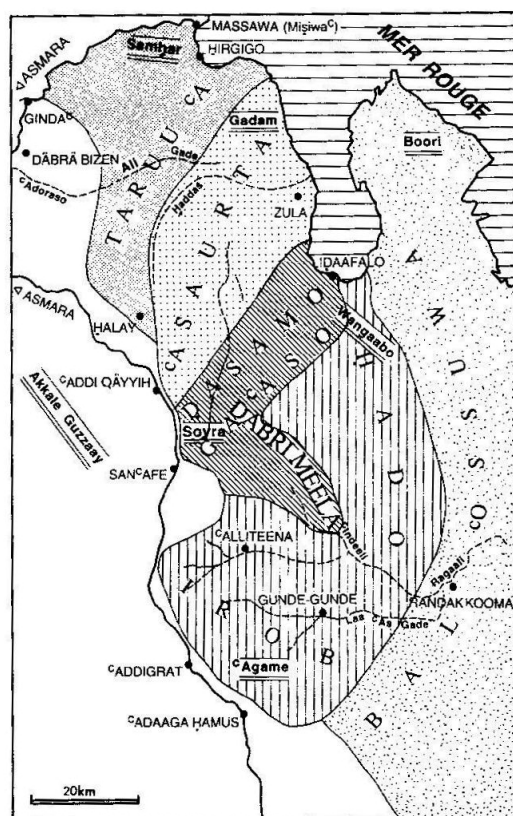


Fig. 1 – The traditional Saho-speaking areas of Eritrea and Ethiopia (from Morin 1995). Names such as Gaʿaso, Dabrimeela, Irob etc. refer to some of the major Saho clans, whereas the Bal'ossuwa are an Afar clan.

Also morphological and lexical features display considerable variation. Generally speaking, some Southern Saho dialects like Xazo share more iso-

glosses with Afar than the Northern ones and Irob (cf. Morin 1994, 1995; Ibrahim Mohammed 1997).

The Eritrean Ministry of Education tried since 1998 to stem language shift and the loss of the traditional culture among the groups of Saho who had been resettled in the western lowlands of Eritrea by establishing a few Saho primary schools in the Gash Barka region, *e.g.*, in Mayshigli. The loss of the ancestral language is also increasing among the Irob of Tigray, who now see themselves as a heavily threatened linguistic minority. However, Irob Saho has been introduced in 2010 as a means of instruction in the schools of the Irob Wereda. On the other hand, the language is not particularly endangered in the traditionally Saho-speaking areas of the highlands and coastal plains of central Eritrea, where several children and women are still wholly monolingual in rural areas, and 39 Saho primary schools have been set up for more than 5000 students (Ministry of Education 2007), that use Saho books for Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, Life Skills, and Saho Language. Such books are in Eritrean written Saho, a standardized and partly koineized variety (cf. Banti, Vergari 2008) and it is to be expected that many local features of all dialect areas will slowly disappear from the speech of the younger generations.

Whereas the Saho-speaking groups of Tigray are settled agriculturalists, most of the Eritrean Saho have had since the earliest accounts by European travellers a mixed farming and pastoralist economy. Their herds of cattle graze in the central highlands of Eritrea and are moved during the rainy season to the coastal lowlands, while fields are cultivated both in these two areas and on the escarpment. Some central Saho-speaking groups also used to drive their herds to graze in the appropriate season in the fertile Hazamo plain, southwest of Caddi Qayyix ('Addi Qayyeh, frequently spelt as Adi-Keih in the English sources but Addi Caieh in the Italian ones). During recent decades, the Ethiopian occupation, war and drought caused several thousands of Eritrean Saho to flee to the Sudan or other countries, or to be resettled as farmers in the western lowlands of Eritrea, mainly in the Gash Barka region. The loss or dramatic reduction of many herds caused settled farming also to play an increasing role in the economy of many traditional areas of the Eritrean Saho, while only a small portion of them engage in trade, teaching or other services or tertiary activities.

However, also the growing impact of modernization has caused a considerable loss of the traditional culture in several areas of life. For instance, while wedding songs such as the *margaddiino*, *nazme* religious poetry, as well as work and children songs are still quite alive, the political *cadar* poetry of the great poets like Farhekoobe (died 1867 or 1868) and Xajji Saalix Xindago (died 1993), that was closely linked to the traditional power structure of the *reezon* ('clan chiefs', sing. *reezanto*), declined during the Ethiopian occupation, and didn't find a renewed place in the new political organization after independence. Today, the *cadar* poems of the great poets of the past are highly revered (cf. Ibra-

him Mohammed Ali 2007: 76-160, and the articles by Axmadsacad Maxammad in the journal *Xanlake*²), but there are no new poets that equal their fame across Saho society. It is the popular culture of male and female singers, who often compose themselves their songs on nationalism, social issues and love, with formal and stylistic procedures similar to those of *cadar* poetry, that are now well known in all Saho communities.

The shift to settled agriculture and increasing sedentarization causes knowledge about cattle herding to be less widespread than in previous times, and many kinds of traditional temporary dwellings to be replaced by permanent buildings both in the highlands and in the lowlands. Traditional architecture made much use of tree trunks and branches, but deforestation reduced forests from 30% of the Eritrean territory in 1889 to 0,4% in 1986. The national Government is now trying to stop this and to extend the total surface of national forests by planting new trees and placing severe restrictions on tree cutting. This has caused many new homes to be built with concrete bricks, with zinc roofs and iron doors. Early accounts such as those by the Italian mission of 1905-06 (Dainelli, Marinelli 1912; Ciruzzi *et al.* 2002) point out that there were no specialized craftsmen or craftswomen in the Saho settlements: every man was able to build his own house or help others to build theirs, and manufactured the wooden objects needed in his household, such as the large bowls known as *koora* or *galadda*, while every woman was able to tan animal skins, prepare leather objects, weave dum palm fibres and manufacture clay containers. This is no longer so. Stone buildings in the highlands are increasingly built by specialised masons, who are sometimes also called in the lowlands for building the stone houses with which the wealthier families are slowly replacing the traditional *macdani* dwellings made of wooden poles, branches and grass. With the only exception of traditional beehives, wooden objects are no longer used, and have been replaced by industrial plastic and metal tools and containers. Also clay pots and jars have disappeared almost everywhere. On the other hand skin mats and, especially, leather containers of different sizes are still prepared by several women as part of their daughters' dowries, even though they are increasingly replaced by objects in other materials. The only traditional female handcraft that is still quite alive is weaving dum palm fibres for producing mats, baskets, and other kinds of containers, even though also synthetic coloured raffia is now sometimes used.

Thus, even though some aspects of the cultural heritage and handcrafts are still alive in the traditionally Saho-speaking areas of Eritrea, it is clear that many of them have vanished or are in sharp decline, and that the linguistic and cultural knowledge that is associated with them will disappear during the next decades.

² Cf. Axmasacad Maxammad Cumar (2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009), where he wrote several articles about Saho culture and language.

2. THE DOCUMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SAHO LANGUAGE

There has been no literacy in Saho until recently. The first known instance of a text written in a variety of Saho is the translation of chapter 11 of John's Gospel prepared by an Irob Lazarist priest of °Alitēnā and published by Reinisch (1878b: 121-33). The Arabic script is now used occasionally by some Moslem sheikhs for writing religious hymns, but it is not known when this Saho Ajami writing tradition began.

However, data on this language have been published on several occasions in the 19th and 20th century, and have been surveyed by Voigt (1975), Bliese (1976: 133-35) and Zaborski (1987). For instance, Salt's *Voyage to Abyssinia* (Salt 1814) contains a short list of 60 Saho words in its Appendix I. The first scientific brief sketches of Saho grammar are probably d'Abbadie (1843) and Ewald (1844), but the first major descriptions of the grammar and lexicon of this language are due to Leo Reinisch, who published a grammar of Central Saho (1878a), a collection of different genres of texts in the same dialect (1889), a dictionary with etymological notes (1890), and a shorter description of Irob Saho (1878b). Early Italian contributions are due to Capomazza (1910-11) and Conti Rossini (1908: 31 ff., 1913) who published lexical and grammatical studies of Northern Saho.

An important contribution to Saho-Afar studies is due to the American Evangelical Mission who started its activities in Eritrea in 1943 focusing on medical work, evangelisation and Bible translation. After working on Afar, Francis E. Mahaffy started working among the Saho writing primers and religious tracts, translating John's Gospel (Mahaffy 1964) and preparing a grammar of Central Saho (Mahaffy, no date). It was with the help of Mahaffy in Gindac and Irhaafalo that Welmers (1952) prepared his paper on the phonology and morphology of Central Saho. On these subjects see Vergari (2008a). A year later Plazikowsky and Wagner (1953) published a short collection of Irob dialogues, proverbs and songs with grammatical notes.

During the last four decades Dick Hayward, Marcello Lamberti and Didier Morin published several contributions on different aspects of Saho grammar and dialectology. Hayward concentrated on Ethiopian Irob in his four articles (Hayward 1979, 1983, 1997; Hayward, Orwin 1991), and also Lamberti (1990 [1992]) published data collected from an Irob informant. Morin instead collected grammatical data and texts in different mainly Eritrean Saho dialects. His 1994 article is the first systematic attempt at identifying the major phonological, grammatical and lexical isoglosses that distinguish the main Saho and Afar dialects (Morin 1994). Some aspects are further discussed in Morin (1995 and 2006), whereas collections of Saho texts are discussed in his two books (Morin 1995 and 1999). Morin's *Des paroles douces comme la soie* also includes a contrastive Saho and Afar grammatical sketch (Morin 1995: 62-127). Other Saho-related work has been done by

Giorgio Banti (1994, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2010), and by Moreno Vergari (2008b).

During the Seventies and Eighties the Derg government launched some small-scale alphabetisation campaigns for Saho-speaking adults both in Tigray and in Eritrea, using teaching materials that employed an adapted form of the Ethiopian Fidel syllabary. This is still used in the Saho schools of the Irob Wereda in Tigray, whereas the Eritrean People's Liberation Front introduced the Latin script for its Saho school books since 1983, and officialised this choice in 1986. This initiated the creation of Eritrean written Saho, that is now widely used by all the educated Saho of Eritrea. It makes use of the standardised Latin orthography described in Appendix 1, and is mainly based upon Northern Saho, even though it also displays a varying degree of Central Saho features. After independence, the Eritrean Ministry of Education launched a dialect survey of the nine national languages, with the aim of «improving the selection of standard dialects» and of providing teachers of each language «with an in-depth study of the issues involved» in this enterprise (Daniel *et al.* 1997: 4). That survey mainly involved word lists and recorded texts, written using the official Eritrean orthography, without marking tones nor finer phonological details in the realizations of vowels and consonants. The data on Saho have been published in a shorter form in the above Daniel *et al.* (1997: 35-36), and in an extensive version (Ibrahim Mohammed 1997). The Curriculum Division of the Department of General Education and the Branch for Adult Education have been busily preparing and publishing textbooks and supplementary reading books in the nine national languages of the country, that are currently used in the school system.

Recent Research

The independent Italian scholars Moreno Vergari and his wife Roberta Zago, who later created the non-profit organisation 'Ethnorêma' in 2003 together with other scholars, started to co-operate with the Eritrean Ministry of Education in 1999 in order to «develop advanced resource material in Saho language». ³ This co-operation produced in a few years the *Basic Saho-English-Italian dictionary* (Vergari, Vergari 2003), that includes ca. 4500 entries of the core lexicon of the language, representing them in the standard orthography. It mainly describes Eritrean written Saho, but also includes several words from the Central and Southern dialects. It also includes Banti, Vergari (2003) as its grammatical introduction. ⁴ A sample of two of its entries is reproduced below:

³ Letter by H.E. Osman Saleh, Minister of Education, dated 21 February 2007, Ref. MOE/ZOBA/23.2007.

⁴ This paper was further expanded into Banti, Vergari (2005); see also Banti, Vergari (2010).

abba *nm* father [padre] *pl* **abbub** *m* ~ **abbat-agle** *f* step-brothers and sisters of a step-mother, siblings [fratellastri e sorellastre di matrigna], **abbat-sacal** *nm* paternal uncle, father's brother [zio paterno, fratello del padre] (*var* **abbassacal**, **abbat-shacal**), **abbassacalhi-numa** *nf* wife of the father's brother [moglie del fratello del padre] (*cf* **abo**, **annat-bacla**)

af *nm* mouth [bocca] *pl* **afuf** (*var* **afof**) *m*; *rel to* **afa**, **ifaaf**, **ifec** ~ **afti-bacla** *nm* mediator for a marriage (male) [mediatore (del matrimonio)] (*cf* **dallaala**, **fanti-bacla**, **fanti-tiya**, **zaaren**), **afti-baclä** *nf* mediator (female) [mediatrice] (*cf* **fanti-baclä**, **fanti-tiyä**), **afti-carha** *nm* premolar tooth [dente premolare]; **afti-gabolle** *pt* first of all [innanzitutto], **afti-tiya** *see the separate entry*

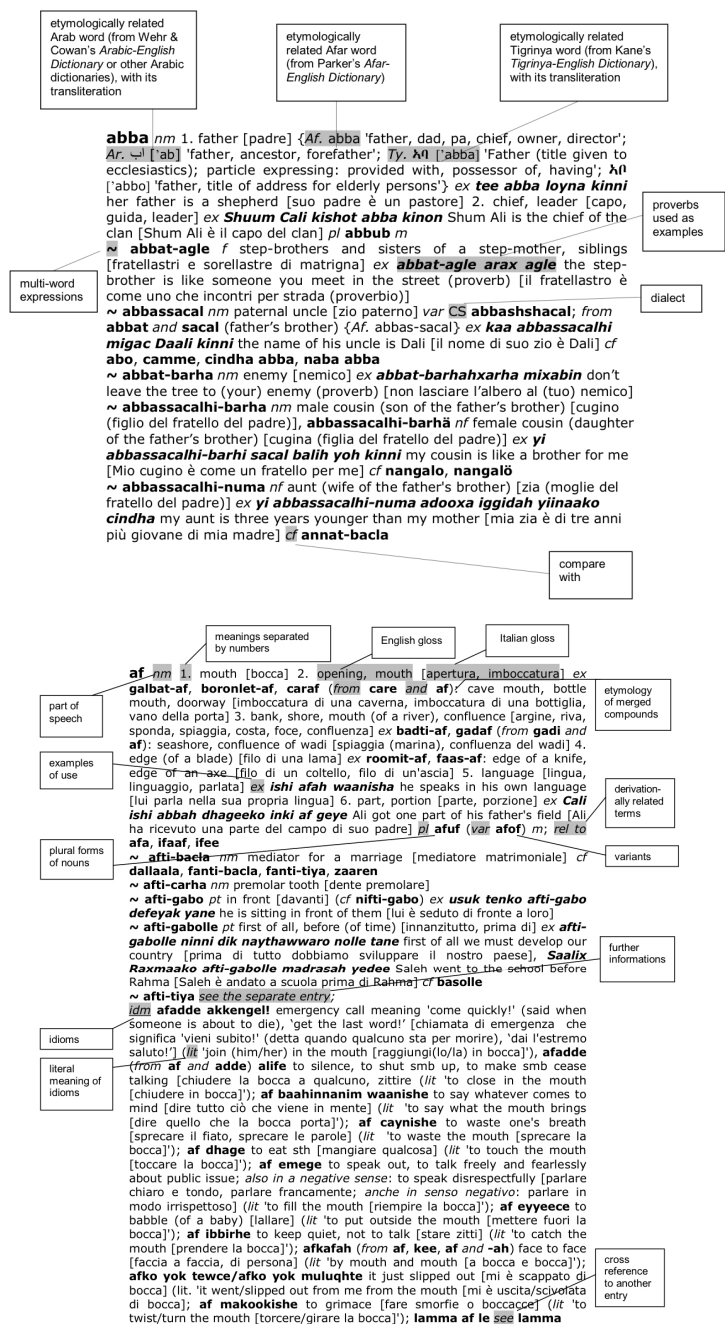
Each entry appears to have the following structure:

- i. Saho entry;
- ii. basic grammatical information like *nm* 'noun masculine', *pl* 'plural' etc.;
- iii. English and Italian glosses;
- iv. plural forms with their respective gender and variant forms;
- v. cross references to variant forms of the entry;
- vi. cross references to other entries that seem to be derivationally related to the entry;
- vii. cross references to other semantically related entries;
- viii. multi-word expressions and phrases where the entry word occurs; each of these is treated as a sub-entry with its own sections (ii.), (iii.), (v.), (vi.) and (vii.).

Additional components occur in entries for verbs or when it necessary to provide information on inflected forms. All the cross-referenced items also occur as individual entries. An enlarged and revised version of this dictionary is being prepared, on the basis of a corpus that includes the following sources:

- a) Reinisch's and Conti Rossini's dictionaries;
- b) all the Saho texts that have been printed in Eritrea since independence, *e.g.*, school textbooks, supplementary reading books, political texts, other books published by Saho authors (Abraahim Maxammad Cali 2005; Ibrahim Mohammed Ali 2007);
- c) Mahaffy's publications;
- d) proverbs, idioms and word lists that have been elicited from informants.

The layout of the new dictionary is partly different from the previous one. As an illustration, the same two entries, *abba* and *af*, are displayed below:



Figs. 2, 3 – The entries *abba* and *af* in Vergari, Vergari, Axmasacad Maxammad Cumar (in preparation). For the etymological comparisons see Kane (2000), Parker (2006, 2009), Parker, Hayward (1985), Wehr, Cowan (1994).

The *Basic Saho-English-Italian dictionary* has been distributed by the Ministry of Education to the Saho elementary schools in 2004. It soon appeared that many teachers were not able to use it properly, because they had never been trained in how to use a dictionary in their native language. Vergari thus decided to prepare a booklet aimed at this specific purpose. This appeared in 2005 and is a monolingual introduction to the main grammatical features of Saho of 71 A4 pages, explaining issues such as parts of speech, grammatical gender, plural formations, transitivity *vs.* intransitivity, the different conjugational classes of verbs etc. (Vergari 2005). Most of the linguistic lexicon it uses did not exist previously in Saho and was created for this publication with the help of Saho teachers and of the Saho panel of the Curriculum Division. It was printed in 7000 copies that were distributed not only to the teachers but also to the students of the Saho schools in Eritrea.

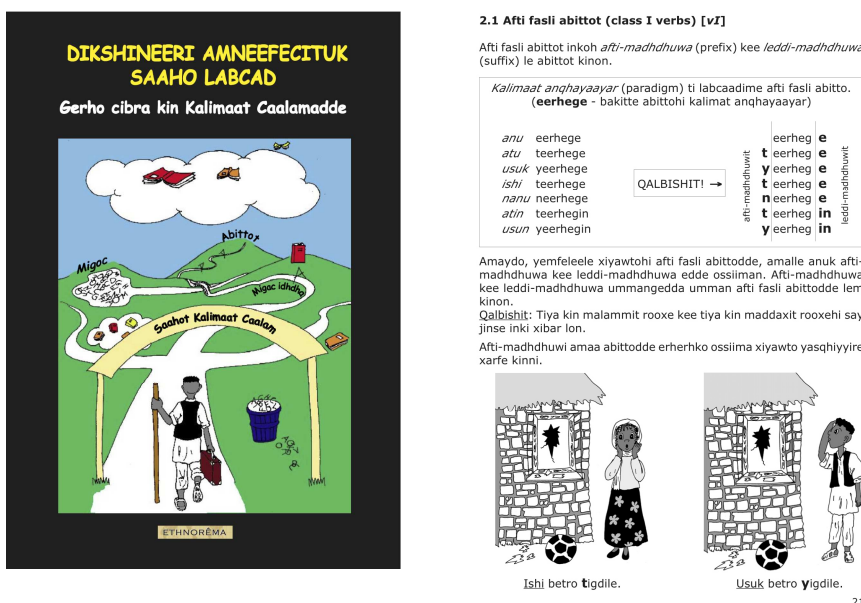


Fig. 4 – The cover page and p. 21 of Vergari (2005) on verbs of class I (prefix-conjugation).

3. THE ATMCS PROJECT

As shown in § 1, the way of life of the Saho-speaking communities has been changing dramatically during the last decades and major portions of their traditional material culture have been lost partially or completely. Documenting what is still to be seen of it is thus an important task, and even more its

variation in the different Saho areas, with an approach that associates contemporary language and culture documentation (see, *e.g.*, Bird, Simons 2003; Gippert *et al.* 2006) with the *Wörter und Sachen*, *i.e.*, ‘words and things’ approach that played an important role in the study of Romance and German dialectology and traditional material culture during the first decades of the 20th century (cf. the *Wörter und Sachen* journal that was published from 1909 to 1944; see also Meringer 1904 and Schuchardt 1912).

In the case of the Saho, Italian sources from the colonial age provide a wealth of useful data on their material culture at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. In particular, the Eritrean Mission of 1905-06 by A. Mochi, L. Loria and others crossed the core Saho-speaking areas of that time and collected an impressive amount of data on how they lived, as shown by Mochi (1906), Mochi, Loria (1906), Dainelli (1908, 1910), Dainelli, Marinelli (1912), Loria (1912, 1936), Venieri (1935), Ciruzzi *et al.* (2002), etc. The objects that mission collected were brought to Italy, and part of them is still displayed in the Museum of Natural History of Florence (Section of Anthropology and Ethnology). In this manner, the objects and practices that are observed today can be compared with those of more than one century ago. This diachronic depth provides the particular enterprise of documenting the cultural heritage of the Eritrean Saho with a dynamic dimension: what can be documented is not only what exists today in the different areas they live in, but also how it has changed and evolved during the last 100 years.

In addition to this, even though important preliminary work had been performed on Saho dialectology by Morin and the Eritrean researchers of the Curriculum Division (cf. § 2), a more detailed survey of the Eritrean Saho dialects was needed in order to document more phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical details and charting them as isoglosses. This is useful not only for the applied purpose of developing written Saho, but also for the scientific study of the dialectology of this language and for documenting its rich variation before it is lost in the speech of the younger generations.

In 2007 the non-profit association ‘Ethnorêma’, the Department of African and Arab Studies (DipSRAPA) of the “L’Orientale” University of Naples, and the Department of Historical Studies (DSS) of the ‘Ca’ Foscari’ University of Venice decided to launch the project ‘Atlas of the Traditional Material Culture of the Saho’ (ATMCS) of Eritrea, as a collaborative enterprise between them and the Ministry of Education of Eritrea. As seen above in § 2.1, both the team of ‘Ethnorêma’ and Giorgio Banti of the DipSRAPA had been working for several years on the Saho language, and Gianni Dore of the DSS had been studying since 1990 the ethnography of some groups of northern Eritrea and of the Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands on the basis both of direct field research and of early colonial sources (cf. Dore 2004 for the Saho, Dore 2006, 2007, etc.).

The ATMCS project aims at documenting the traditional material culture of the Saho, its variation across the different Saho-speaking communities of Eritrea, the terminology it is associated with as well as the general dialect variation in phonology, grammar and the lexicon. In particular, the ATMCS collects data on the following cycles of traditional activities:

- a) bee keeping and honey harvesting;
- b) traditional buildings (houses, enclosures etc.) and how they are built;
- c) preparing leather objects;
- d) preparing mats and other objects with plant fibres;
- e) animal husbandry;
- f) cultivating different domesticated plants;
- g) food (acquisition, transformation, cooking, eating, commensality).

Field research is carried out in different documentary locations of Eritrea, that have been chosen for representing different dialect varieties of Saho as well as the above mentioned cycles of activities as they are carried out by native speakers of this language. Whenever possible, the same locations of the Italian mission of 1905-06 were selected. In each location local informants are administered specific questionnaires in order to collect data about:

- these activities;
- the artefacts that are used for performing them;
- how such artefacts are used;
- who builds them and how;
- technical knowledge and how it is transmitted;
- popular beliefs, tales and proverbs about such artefacts;
- dialect variation.

Research is carried out by Italian scholars and Eritrean researchers who have been trained during the first stage of the project. Drawings, pictures and audiovisuals of the different artefacts and kinds of activities are produced, in order to document as fully as possible the above seven cycles as well as their interactions. The new data obtained in the above ways are then compared with the existing descriptions, pictures and collections of artefacts from the 19th and 20th centuries, *e.g.*, from the already mentioned ‘Eritrean Mission’ 1905-1906. In the present authors’ opinion this represents an important difference from the unfortunately very few similar linguistic and ethnographic research initiatives that have been published for Saharan and Subsaharan Africa, such as the excellent work by the Frankfurt team on Hausa and other Chadic languages (*e.g.*, Ibrizimow 1996; Bross, Ahmad Tela Baba 1996), Leus, Salvadori (2006) on Boraana Oromo, and Ritter (2009) on the Tuareg.

In addition to the wealth of dialectological data that are gathered in this manner during the interviews on material culture with the informants in the various documentary locations, a dedicated dialect questionnaire has been de-

veloped. It includes 130 questions on lexical items from different areas of the basic and cultural lexicon, on their phonology and morphology, on morpho-phonemic and tonal features of verb inflection, on different sets of pronouns and interrogatives, on numerals, and on several aspects of syntax. As an example, question no. 62 is reproduced below:

Question no.	Glosses	Sample translations in NC Saho	Elicited answers
	Play <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘She is playing with her sister’ • ‘Previously were you playing with my brother?’ 	<i>Digire, catabe</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ishi saclaalih digiraa tane</i> • <i>Kalxa yi sacallih digirtak tineho?</i> 	

Fig. 5 – Question no. 62 ‘play’ of the ATMCS dialect questionnaire.

It can be seen that two sample sentences are associated to the lexical item ‘play’. The English glosses were tested with Axmasacad Maxammad Cumar, the Eritrean ATMCS coordinator, who is a native speaker of northern Central (NC) Saho, before administering the questionnaire to the informants. The sample sentences were tailored in order to elicit additional grammatical and syntactic data. For instance the two above sentences make it possible to test the postposition *-lih* ‘with’, the existence of variable converbal forms like *digirtak* 2s. and *digiraa* 3sf. that is a known Northern Saho feature, the occurrence of interrogative particles like *-ho* in yes-no questions, the imperfect and perfect forms of the auxiliary ‘to be’ (respectively *tane* imperfect 3s. f. and *tine* perfect 3s. f.), etc.

Different meetings and workshops have been held from 2007 to 2010 in Castelnovo Scrivia (Alessandria), Bolzano, Naples and Asmara on language documentation, techno-cultural anthropology and dialect atlases. Several journeys were also made to the Section for Anthropology and Ethnology of the Museum of Natural History in Florence, in order to work on the Saho materials collected during the ‘Eritrean Mission’ of 1905-1906.

The first ATMCS field campaign in Eritrea took place in January and February 2008, the second and third one during the same months in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Caddi Qayyix and the villages of Safiira, Ciyaago, Kaaribossa and Thiisha were visited during the 2008 campaign; Caddi Qayyix, Safiira, Kaaribossa, Cishka, Dhamxina, Xaruba, Golo and Mako in 2009. The lowland villages of Buyya, Irhaafalo and Xadish on the Red Sea coast were visited in 2010, together with the highland settlement of Laacaytan on the northernmost tip of the Saho-speaking heartland. The field campaigns were carried out by the Italian team and the local coordinator, Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar, of Caddi Qayyix.

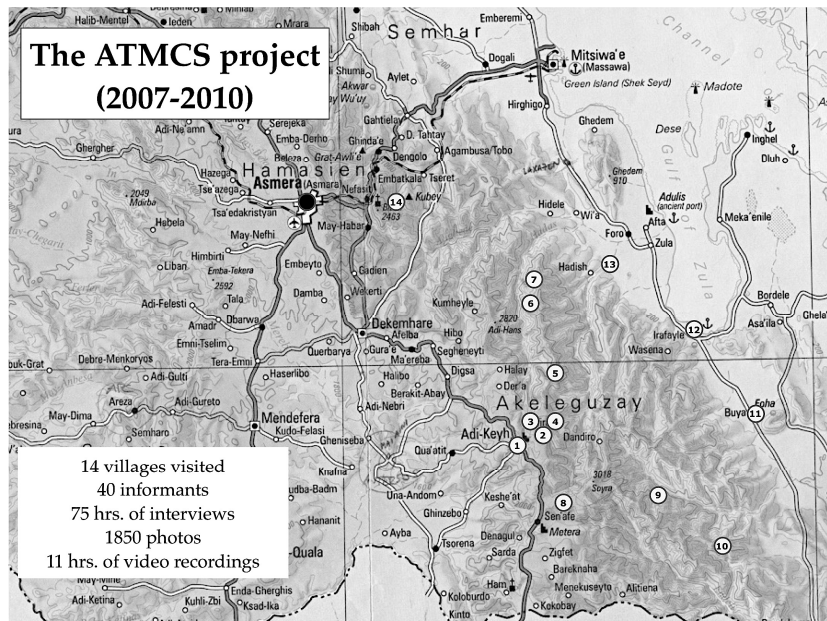


Fig. 6 – The approximate positions of the fourteen documentary locations visited by the ATMCS team in 2008, 2009 and 2010 (adapted from International Travel Maps 1997):

- | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Caddi Qayyix (2008, 2009) | 6. Dhamxina (2009) | 11. Buyya (2010) |
| 2. Safiira (2008, 2009) | 7. Xaruba (2009) | 12. Irhaafalo (2010) |
| 3. Ciyaago (2008) | 8. Thiisha (2008) | 13. Xadish (2010) |
| 4. Cishka (2009) | 9. Golo (2009) | 14. Laacaytan (2010) |
| 5. Kaaribossa (2008, 2009) | 10. Mako (2009) | |

The following cycles of activities have been documented:

- bee keeping (Ciyaago, Kaaribossa, Dhamxina, Thiisha, Mako, Laacaytan),
- traditional buildings (Safiira, Kaaribossa, Thiisha, Buyya, Irhaafalo, Xadish, Laacaytan),
- traditional artefacts in leather and plant fibres (Safiira, Irhaafalo),
- animal husbandry (Golo and Xaruba, also with informants from the nearby villages of Maahiyo and Raaw, Buyya, Irhaafalo),
- cultivation (Cishka, Kaaribossa, Golo, Buyya, Xadish, Laacaytan),
- other aspects of the Saho cultural heritage, such as poetry and festivals associated with the different cycles of activities (Caddi Qayyix).

The local researchers and informants represented different Saho clans:

- a) Tharuuca: Bet Sarax and Bet Musa clans (speaking Northern Saho);

- b) Casawurta: Casaleesan, Leelish Care, and Casakare clans (speaking Northern Saho);
- c) Xasabat Care clan (speaking Northern Saho);
- d) Minifire: Faqhat Xarak, Gacaso and Dhasamo clans (speaking different varieties of Central Saho);
- e) Dabrimeela: Shum Afa Gaysha clan (speaking a southern variety of Central Saho);
- f) Xazo: Xakabi Gaysa and Casa Cali Gaysa clans (speaking Southern Saho).

In particular, the main informants have been:

- Ibraahim Shuum Maxmud ‘Xajji’ Xammad Moosa and ‘Xajji’ Siraaj ‘Xajji’ Maxammad Cumar, at Caddi Qayyix;
- Xaliima Saalix Axmad, Xaliima Idirish Cumar, Maxammad ‘Xajji’ Cumar ‘Xajji’ Axmadsacad and ‘Xajji’ Suleeman Cumar Maxammad, at Safiira;
- Maxammadnur ‘Xajji’ Axmad ‘Baska’, at Ciyaago;
- Axmad Maxammad Axmadsacad, at Cishka;
- Maxammadcali Axmad Maxammad and Saalix Cumar Ibraahim, at Kaaribossa;
- Maxmuud Ibraahim Aboobakar and Maxmuud Maxammad Ibraahim, at Dhamxina;
- Axmaddin Cabdalla Ibraahim, Maxammad Axmad Idris, Cusban Sacad Moosa and Ibraahim Maxammad Cali, at Xaruba;
- Cumardiin Ibraahim Ismaacil, at Thiisha;
- Maxammad Axmad Xigo, Cabdu Yoosuf Cabdu, Suleyman Ismaacil Suleyman and Siraaj Cabdalla Axmad, at Golo;
- Xammad Adam Axmad, at Mako;
- Ismaacil Maxammad Xigo, Adam Cumar Cali, Jumca Maxammad Ismaacil, Mayram Cumar Cali, Dawud Cabdalla Suleeman, Abuubakar Suleeman Cabdalla, Sileeman Maxammad Abraahim and Maxammad Saalix Cumar at Buyya;
- Maxammad-Shifa Adam Maxammad, Maxmud Maxammad Cali, ‘Sheekh’ Soliimaan Ismaacil Maxammad, Ibraahiim Maxammad Ismaacil at Irhaafalo;
- ‘Xajji’ Maxmud Maxammad Saciid, Ismaaciil Ibraahim Xasan and Maxammad Cali Zukur at Xadish;
- Ibraahim Xuseen Cali, Diini Cabdalla Abraahim, Jumca Axmad Suleeman and Nasra Maxmud Suleeman at Laacaytan.

During the interviews it has been possible to record ca. 75 hrs. of audio files, 11 hrs. of video files, and to take ca. 1850 pictures. Hundreds of new words have been recorded for the special lexicons of the above mentioned cycles of activities, together with detailed explanations about the objects and the

actions they indicate. Preliminary inquiries on poetry and on festivals associated with the above cycles of activities have also been carried out with two well-known Saho elders in Caddi Qayyix, *i.e.*, Ibraahim Shuum and 'Xajji' Siraaj.

The questionnaire on dialect variation was fully developed only in the second half of 2009, and was administered during the 2010 field campaign to two informants for each of the four documentary locations. One of the two has always been markedly younger than the other one, but only in Laacaytan has it been possible to interview two women rather than two men.

Work has been also done in Asmara before and after the three field campaigns, especially on the lexical items that had been collected. To this purpose, the ATMCS team worked especially with Abraahim Maxammad Cali, coordinator of the Saho Panel of the Department of General Education (Ministry of Education), and with the well-known Saho scholar Cabdulqaadir Saalix Maxammad. The Eritrean coordinator of the project, Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar, came to Italy in July-August 2008, 2009 and 2010, where he worked together with the team of *Ethnorêma* in archiving and provisionally classifying what had been collected during the three field campaigns.

The ATMCS project has been presented during several seminars and workshops: (i.) in Florence on 15 December 2007 during a workshop on the first Italian ethnographic museum, (ii.) at the Dalarna University in Falun (Sweden) in November 2008, (iii.) at the 'Ca' Foscari' University of Venice on 8 May 2009, (iv.) at the IsIAO (Italian Institute for Africa and the East) in Rome on 19 November 2009, (v.) in Procida on 3 May 2010 at a workshop on 'Fieldwork in Linguistics' (Oriental University of Naples), (vi.) in Naples on 13 May 2010 at the 'Giornata Internazionale di Studi sull'Eritrea' (Oriental University of Naples), (vii.) in Bolzano/Bozen on 2 June 2010 at a Workshop on Language Documentation (Free University of Bolzano/Bozen), (viii.) in Marburg on 20 September 2010 at the 31st Deutscher Orientalistentag (University of Marburg), and (ix.) again in Naples on 1 October 2010 at an Italian meeting on African Studies (Oriental University of Naples).

Finally, the first results of the ATMCS project on one of the above-mentioned cycles of activities have been published on a special issue of the *Ethnorêma* online journal.⁵ It contains three articles on Saho beekeeping, a general introduction on the project (Banti 2009) and this special issue of the journal, as well as a paper on the Italian mission of 1905-06 (Dore 2009a) and another paper on how its materials are displayed in the above-mentioned museum in Florence (Pacini 2009). The topic of beekeeping has been chosen because of the continuing role it plays in the economy of several Saho-speaking communities of the Eritrean highlands, and because the data that had been col-

⁵ *Ethnorêma* 5 (2009), freely downloadable from the website <www.ethnorema.it/journal.htm>.

lected during the first two campaigns were already sufficient for being discussed in an organized way.

Gianni Dore's other essay shows the wealth of data that an intelligent and critical analysis of the Italian colonial sources can yield on a specific ethnographic topic such as beekeeping and the traditional production of honey (Dore 2009b). This paper is followed by Moreno and Roberta Vergari's contribution (Vergari, Vergari 2009), that displays the data that have been collected on this topic by the ATMCS team in the format of an 'encyclopaedic lexicon', a way of documenting the cultural and linguistic heritage that is being adopted by several scholars (cf. the first part of this section). The best example that has appeared so far for a language community of the Horn of Africa is the above mentioned Leus and Salvadori (2006), an encyclopaedic dictionary of the culture of the Boraana, an Oromo-speaking group that lives between south-western Ethiopia and northern Kenya. The contribution by the Vergaris shows how historical accounts from the 19th century, dialectological data and audiovisual material can be integrated into a very rich documentation of this particular area of the cultural heritage of the Saho-speaking communities. Figures (6-8) show the entry on 'beehive' of their lexicon. The main entry components can be clearly seen:

- (i.) the entry on the specific item, its variants in the different Saho dialects, its meaning, some etymologically related items in neighbour languages, grammatical information and cross references to other entries;
- (ii.) subentries on different variants of the item with detailed explanations and some pictures;
- (iii.) pictures and quotations from colonial sources that provide additional data and a diachronic dimension;
- (iv.) whenever possible, quotations from Reinisch's *Wörterbuch* (Reinisch 1890) related to the specific item.

qafo *nf NS, CS1, CS2 ~ kafo CS2, SS* 1. beehive 2. large container made of clay and animal dung used as granary, normally place in traditional houses [**naxsa**] also for dividing a room {Ty. ቁፎ [qofo] or ቁፎ [q^wäfo] or ቁፎ [qäfo]} *pl qaf*of, *m cf* caretto, gaxseena, **gidact**o, murhcumse, mascashalä.

— **caadat qaf**o traditional beehive made of animal dung or of a carved tree trunk.



Work in progress: traditional beehives [**gidact**o] drying on the roof of a **naxsa**. Kaaribossa.



Empty **gidact**o in Dhamxina.

Beehives made of animal dung are also called **gidact**o ~ **gadcayto** [→]; cow, goat or sheep dung [**gidac** →] is used to this purpose. They are usually prepared by women, who use dung they collect during the rainy season, when there is more grass and the animals produce it more abundantly.

PREPARATION: First of all the dung is mixed with ashes [**gomboz**], red earth [**casa buure**], barley straw [**cadeelaw xasar**], dry grass [**kafin cashsho**] and some water. The hive is built vertically by placing successive layers of this mixture upon each other, so as to form a sort of cylinder, ca. 100-150 cm. in length, with bottom and top openings of ca. 25-30 cm. After laying one layer it is left to dry before laying the following ones. While building the hive and letting it dry up, it is usually kept on the roof of a **naxsa**, the traditional dwelling of the Saho's in the highlands, so as to prevent animals

from damaging it [see picture]. The whole procedure lasts ca. 15-20 days. After building the main body of the hive, the two lateral round lids are prepared, with animal dung or flat stones (that are later sealed with animal dung). A small hole [**maatot** →] is also made at the center of the long side of the hive, as an entrance for the bees. After laying it in a horizontal

Fig. 7 – The first part of the entry on *qaf*o 'beehive' in Vergari, Vergari (2009: 77 ff.).

position in the apiary [**dagge** →], it is protected from atmospheric agents – or other accidental causes of damage to its structure – by means of different layers of rags [**durruca**] covered by flat stones or corrugated zinc sheets [**zingo**] [see picture]. (In the past old skin carpets [**sido** or **warhxo**] were also used to this purpose). Some beekeepers cover the upper stones with a layer of earth like the roofs of the **naxsa**'s [see picture]. This kind of beehive is regarded as the best one for the bees, that may also consume some of the animal dung, but it doesn't last more than 6 or 7 years, even if it is well protected.



Protective covering for traditional beehives.
Ciyaago and Kaaribossa

Traditional wooden hives are built by carving pieces of tree trunks, preferably from sycamores or similar trees [**indacaaro** →, **subula** → or **gota** →], because they provide a higher inner temperature. The trunk is cut with an axe [**faas**] or a saw [**magaaz**] into a piece of the length of three cubits [**xuluf** 'cubit', i.e., ca. 150 cms. It is then shaped by means of a large chisel [**mishar**] in its inner and outer sides, practicing two lateral openings [see picture below]. An awl [**mandal**] is then used for opening a lateral hole that the bees will use as their door [**maatot** →], when going to harvest pollen and coming back. Even though these hives are much more resistant than the animal dung ones, they are provided with protective coverings of different kinds. These two traditional hives may yield up to 30 kg. of honey.

«I see here [in Mako] for the first time some beehives obtained from cylindrical tree trunks, by carving them out and giving them a tubular shape,

whose two openings are closed by two tiles made of animal dung and earth. At the middle of the cylinder there is a hole allowing bees to enter. The wooden cylinder is placed horizontally on a heap of stones, and covered with pieces of tree bark.» (Aldobrandino Mochi - Translated from *Diario*, pag. 121).



Empty wooden beehives. Kaaribossa and Thiisha.

Fig. 8 – The second part of the entry on *qafo* 'beehive' in Vergari, Vergari (2009: 77 ff.).



Modern beehive [xokomat qafɔ]. Ciyaago.

— **xokomat qafɔ** modern beehives with removable frames (*lit* ‘government hive’).

The Eritrean government has organised several courses for beekeepers and provided them with modern hives with removable frames [*see picture*]. These are frequently used together with the traditional ones. However, some people still prefer the old system, both because it yields higher amounts of honey (a modern hive may contain not more than 10 - 20 kg. of honey), and because bees seem to prefer the traditional **qafɔ**, especially those made of cow dung.

(*Rein.*) *Qafɔ*, seltener *qaffɔ* plur. *qáfɔf* subst. fem. (‘Af. id., s. Bil. s. v.)
 1) der binenstock 254, 27. 2) grosses binenstockartiges gefäss
 aus thon oder auch aus den blättern der dumpalme geflochten,
 für aufbewahrung von getreide 123, 5 ff.; 124, 2 u. a.

Fig. 9 – The third part of the entry on *qafɔ* ‘beehive’ in Vergari, Vergari (2009: 77 ff.).

Giorgio Banti and Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar’s paper discusses twelve proverbs on bees and honey in different dialectal varieties of Saho and a contemporary text on beekeeping drawn from one of the school books that are used today in the Eritrean Saho schools (Banti, Axmadsacad 2009). The detailed linguistic analysis of these texts, that are displayed both in their written form and as audio files, is associated with a discussion of the formal features of the twelve proverbs that highlights the parallels with what is known about the formal organization of Saho poetry. Figure (9) below shows the fifth proverb from their paper, and how its analysis is organised.

(5.) *Zate le zizzaale lee baska betta, zate hin ziizzi lee xage beeta*

‘The bees that agree with each other eat honey, while the beetle that doesn’t agree with the others eats faeces’

Source:

Abraahim Maxammad Cali (2005: 137), who spells *zatele* for *zate le* and adds *yaanah* ‘they say that’ at the end of this proverb. Immediately after it he adds a variant with *qacattit* ‘flies’ instead of *ziizzi* in its second half, and the two forms of *beete* ‘eat’ in the pf. instead of the impf.: *Zatele zizzaale lee baska bette, zate hin qacattit lee xage beete yaanah*.

Meaning:

Working together is necessary for achieving success. Achieving unity is important for performing significant tasks.

Grammatical analysis:

Zaté f. abs. ‘agreement, discussion’.

Lé relative present 3s. of *le* ~ *leya* VIII ‘have’.

Zizzaalé nom. of *zizzaalé* f. ‘bee(s)’ used as a collective term.

Lee ... *lee* enclitic conjunctions used for contrasting NP’s in two successive clauses (*lel* could not be used here). Notice that *lee* occurs in second position, after the first NP of its clause.

Betta impf. 3s. f. of *beete* ‘eat’. Notice that it is realized as [bet:ä:] with its final vowel lengthened and with a rising tone in order to mark that it is immediately followed by another clause.

Hin relative present 3s. of *hina* ‘lack, not to have’.

Ziizzi nom. of *ziizza* m. ‘beetle’.

Xáge m. abs. ‘faeces, shit’ (mostly of human beings).

Beetá impf. 3s. m. of *beete* ‘eat’.

Text structure analysis:

This proverb consists of two lines of almost equal length:

<i>zate le zizzaale lee baska betta</i>	11 σ,
<i>zate hin ziizzi lee xage beeta</i>	10 σ.

The two lines display a quasi-rhyme in *betta* vs. *beeta*. There is consonantal assonance in the two initial nouns of each of the two lines (*zate* - *zizzaale* and *zate* - *ziizzi*), as well as alliteration in *baska betta* and *beeta*, and in *le* and the two occurrences of *lee*. The consonantal assonance pattern is thus the following one (notice that Ø indicates a sound that is not relevant for consonantal assonance):

<i>z - l - z (- zz) - l - b - b</i>	[= A - B - A (- A) - B - C - C]
<i>z - Ø - z (- zz) - l - Ø - b</i>	[= A - Ø - A (- A) - B - Ø - C]

The identical initial word *zate* occurs in the two contrastive relative clauses *zate le* ‘who have agreement’ and *zate hin* ‘who don’t have agreement’. The two contrasted nominatives *zizzaale* and *ziizzi* are of unequal syllabic length but display consonant assonance, while the other two contrasted nouns *baska* and *xage* are of identical syllabic length, since both of them are disyllables.

The syntactic structure of the two lines is perfectly parallel:

[[[N V]_{RELATIVE CLAUSE} N]_{SUBJECT NP} *lee* N_{OBJECT} V]_S

Fig. 10 – Proverb no. 5 in Banti, Axmadsacad (2009: 93 f.).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The next step of the ATMCS project is the publication of a volume on the traditional architecture of the Saho that appears to be quite different in the highlands and in the coastal plains. The collection of data on the other five cycles of traditional activities has still to be completed.

The interviews related to the dialect questionnaires are now being transcribed, together with the other interviews. But eight informants for the questionnaire cannot be regarded as adequate sample for representing even the major dialect varieties of Saho, and it will be necessary to administer it to other informants in the next future.

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APPENDIX 1

Chart of Saho sounds (adapted from IPA - revised to 2005)

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Labio-velar	Alveolar	Palatoalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	<i>p</i> b			t d		ɖ		k g		ʔ
Affricate					tʃ ɟʃ					
Nasal	m			n			<i>ɲ</i>			
Trill				r						
Flap						ɽ				
Fricative		f v		s z	ʃ			x	ħ ʕ	h
Approximant			w				j			
Lateral approximant				l						

EJECTIVE CONSONANTS (NON-PULMONIC)

	Alveolar	Palatoalveolar	Velar
Plosive	t'		k'
Affricate		tʃ'	
Fricative	s'		x'

- Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonants.
- The symbols in **bold** generally do not occur in the Southern dialects of Saho.
- The symbols in *italic* and **bold italic** only occur in loanwords.

VOWELS

<i>short</i>	Front	Central	Back	<i>long</i>	Front	Central	Back
Close	i		u	Close	i:		u:
Close-mid	e		o	Close-mid	e:		o:
Open		a		Open		a:	

SAHO ORTHOGRAPHY

The Eritrean official Saho orthography has 36 signs and 9 of them are digraphs. Notice in particular:

c =	[ʕ]	qh =	[x ']
č =	[ʧ]	rh =	[ɾ]
ch =	[ʧ ']	sh =	[ʃ]
dh =	[d]	th =	[t ']
gn =	[ɲ]	ts =	[s ']
j =	[dʒ]	x =	[ħ]
kh =	[x]	y =	[j]
q =	[k ']		

A hyphen (-) is used for representing a word-internal glottal plosive [ʔ] as in *qiraa-a* [k'ira:ʔa] 'reading, learning', or for separating two letters that would otherwise be misread as a digraph, as in *dor-ho* [dorho] 'chicken'.

Long consonants and vowels are represented with a double letter, *e.g.*, *aa* [a:], *bb* [b:].

An umlaut (¨) is used to distinguish some feminine nouns with a final high pitch accent from their masculine counterparts, *e.g.*, *barhä* [baɾá] 'daughter' vs. *barha* [bára] 'son'.

SUMMARY

After a brief introduction on the Saho of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia, their language and cultural heritage, this paper reports what has been done for documenting and describing their East Cushitic language until now. A section is devoted to the history of literacy in Saho, its recent development as one of the nine national languages of Eritrea, and its introduction in the schools of Tigray in 2010. The subsequent section describes the Italo-Eritrean project of an Atlas of the Traditional Material Culture of the Saho of Eritrea, that started in 2007, describing what it has been doing till now and its publications.

Keywords: Saho, 'Afar, Cushitic, Eritrea, language documentation, material culture, dialectology, lexicography, anthropological linguistics, oral literature

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