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PEOPLES OF
THE HORN OF AFRICA

SOMALI, AFAR AND SAHO

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THE SAHO

Available information on the Saho is scanty so that little more than a very general outline of their location and tribal constitution can be given.

Saho is essentially a linguistic classification, for, although they speak a common language, the Saho tribes vary considerably in origins,¹ organization, tribal law, and customs. They have never constituted a political unity.²

TERRITORY

The majority of the Saho inhabit Eritrea. They occupy an area limited to the north by the Massauwa-Ginda road, to the south by the valleys of the Mai Muna and Endeh, to the west by the lofty scarps of the Ethiopian Highlands, and to the east by the Dankalia plains of Samoti and Wangabo. Beyond these limits, to the south in Ethiopia, the Irob Saho occupy the valley of the Laasgeda and advance up the foothills with their flocks as far as Debra Damo and the upper reaches of the Belesa.

Mainly pastoralists, the Saho migrate in winter towards the coastal region, returning in summer to move across the country of the Tigrina-speaking peoples far to the west, across Akele-Guzai and over the Mareb into the Hazamo plain towards the Serai. These movements have led to the settlement of Saho on the plateau where they have adopted the Tigrina or Tigre languages. In the other direction, Tigre and Afar-speaking peoples have moved among the Saho and adopted their language. Settlement in both directions is continually taking place.³ The neighbours of the Saho are to the north, the Tigre-speaking peoples of Samhar, to the south, the Asamara Afar, to the east, and especially in the Buri peninsula, Adomara Afar; and to the west the Abyssinians.

The total number of Saho-speaking people is estimated at 48,000.⁴

TRIBES

The largest autonomous Saho tribal aggregate is the Asaorta (18,000) who derive from an early wave of Afar immigration. The Asaorta migrate with their stock (mainly oxen)⁵ between the sea and the Akele-Guzai. Although now devout Mohammedans, they were for a long time pagans (followers of the cult of the Sky-God, *Wah*) with Mount Falum the central shrine at which an annual sacrifice of a white cow is still held.⁶ Islam has been introduced through the absorption of priestly sections of Arabian origin such as the Me Embara Bait Khalifa, and Bait Shaik Mohammed. During the 19th century many Asaorta joined the Mirghaniyya *tarīqa*.

The Asaorta comprise five tribes known as the *hawn are*, "the five houses," and trace descent to a common eponymous ancestor Omar Asaor.⁷ These are the Bait Lehsh, Fogorotto, Bait Fagih, Asalissan, and Assakeri; the Bait Lehsh are considered the first-born lineage, and at one time their chief represented the five Asaorta tribes, although each tribe now has its own chief. The Bait Fagih provide the Islamic *qadi* for the Asaorta.⁸ The Enjagi Sennare are a small tribe allied to the Asaorta.

¹ Conti Rossini, 1914, pp 852-3.

² Nadel, *Africa*, 1946, p 8

³ Conti Rossini, 1937, p 141.

⁴ *Races and Tribes of Eritrea*, 1943.

⁵ Venieri, 1905, p 65

⁶ Remisch, 1889-90, II, p 132

⁷ Pollera, 1935, p 266, Bruna, 1907, p. 1,696 genealogy

⁸ Bruna, op cit, p 1,698, genealogy

Essentially semi-nomadic mountain dwellers in a state of transition towards sedentary cultivation, they remain in the plains in winter for as short a time as possible, practising some cultivation, and return later to the plateau where they cultivate more extensively and where many Asaorta sections are permanently settled. Here the Abyssinian stone and thatched hut (*hudmo*⁹) has been widely adopted and largely replaces the traditional Saho conical shelters (*datha, are*¹⁰), though among the sedentary Asaorta both types are found side by side. Of all the Saho, the Asaorta practise the most intensive cultivation, which they have adopted from the adjacent Abyssinians, Asaorta stock-herders have contracted to tend the Abyssinians' stock and take them with their own to the coastal grazing in return for payment in grain.¹¹

The Minifere ("the sons of Mina") number about 11,000 and inhabit southern Eritrea between Senafe and Arafali. This tribe appears to represent a fusion of Afar with an Abyssinian garrison placed in the country to bar the way to further Afar expansion northwards. Some of the Minifere were at one time Christian, and agriculturist sections living on Mount Soira (especially the Asa Yofisha) still remain Christian although the majority had adopted Islam by the beginning of the 19th century. Consistent with their mixed origins, one tradition derives their eponymous ancestor Mina from royal Abyssinian stock (Christian) and another relates him to the family of the Prophet.¹² The three Minifere sub-tribes, the Faqat Harag, Rasamo, and Gaso, comprise some 13 principal sections, and the Faqat Harag constitute a religious group, their chief acting as *qadi* in appeals from the decisions of the other chiefs.

The Teroa (Tor'uwa), (2,550 in 1931), the most northerly of the Saho, inhabit the territory between the rivers Haddas and Algede, being nomadic between the Hamasen and the coast. In contrast to the Minifere, whose stock mainly consists of sheep and goats, but like the Asaorta, the Teroa possess large herds of oxen. In origin they are a mixture of Ge'ez and Tigre-speaking peoples with Saho, Saho having become the dominant language although Tigre is also spoken. They claim descent from an immigrant Arab. There are two fractions, the Bait Sarah (or Sarah Are¹³) and the Bait Mose (or Mose 'Are), the second bilingual. Many Teroa families emigrate among the peoples of Samhar.¹⁴

The Hazu or Haso (4,000) live to the east and south-east of the Minifere migrating between the Gulf of Zula and the River Endeli. There are seven fractions: the Omartu, Musa Elebago, Consubi Fire, Hammedi Gashia, Mohammed Kauwa, Assa Ali Gashia, and Assa Ahla. All the Hazu are nomadic and "never cultivate, but live at feud with the Danakil and with their neighbours in Irob."¹⁵ Their main wealth is in sheep and goats¹⁶ Their chief has the title *Ona* and sub-chiefs are called *shun*. Like the Teroa, the Hazu contain Tigre-speaking elements.

The Debrī-Mela ("the people of the Mela and Debra mountains") (c. 1,000) live south of the Akele-Guzai on the mountain chain of Mount Mola. They claim descent from a certain Sultan Jergis of Istanbul whose descendant, Ismail, is said to have reached their territory towards the end of the 17th century. This strange tradition suggests a connection with a former Turkish garrison of Massauwa. There are two fractions, the Alades of Ambra Debra who are Saho-speaking Mohammedans and nomadic pastoralists, and the Lab Hale, settled cultivators, Ethiopic Christians who speak Tigrina and Saho.¹⁷

⁹ Venieri, op cit, pp 8-9; Danelli e Marnelli, 1913, pp 396 ff

¹⁰ Venieri, op cit, pp 12-23, illustrations

¹¹ Parkyns, 1853, pp 124-6

¹² Conti Rossini, 1914, p 22; Pollera, op cit, p 288

¹³ Note the alternative Arabic and Saho nomenclature

¹⁴ Pollera, op cit, pp 264-5

¹⁵ Longrigg, 1945, p 162

¹⁶ Venieri, op cit, p 55

¹⁷ Pollera, op. cit, pp 268-9

The Irob (c. 10,000) are a large Saho-speaking Christian tribe who live in Abyssinian territory, south of the Debra-Mela and the Endeli River, and migrate on the plateau as far as Debra Damo. According to Conti Rossini their name means "the European who came by the sea." They are gradually adopting the language and culture of the Abyssinians among whom they live.¹⁸

Less important Saho tribes are: the Idda (1,200),¹⁹ Iddefer (1,000),²⁰ Baradotta (900),²¹ and the Assabat 'Are,²² all of mixed origin; there are also Afar tribes who are now Saho-speaking, such as the Reza Mara²³ and Bellesuwa.²⁴

There are also some small Arab clans, often dispersed but important in the part they play in introducing and consolidating Islam. The Intile Sheik Are, a branch of the Me Embara (Asaorta), are a holy section centred on Donagub, but with members scattered among all Saho tribes as Koranic teachers and mediators in disputes.²⁵ The Bart Khalifa, Bart Sheik Mahmud, Bart Tawakal, and Abdalla Sanaa, are small groups of very mixed origin united by common association. The Bart Khalifa, for example, comprise families of Sudanese, Afar, Dassamo,²⁶ and Asaorta.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE

There are no studies of Saho social and political organization, or even of customary procedure, which is said to vary considerably from tribe to tribe corresponding to the different ethnic compositions of particular tribes.

The constitution of tribes is said to be democratic with an elected chief. There is no caste system. The Saho have remained virtually independent both of the Tigreans and of the *na'ib* of Arkiko, although they sometimes pay tribute to both.²⁷ In travellers' tales they figure as wild and fearful brigands dominating Samhar and the eastern slopes of the mountains. Now, however, agriculture is developing gradually where it is practicable. Islam has made a much deeper impression upon them than upon the Afar, ability to read and write Arabic is general, and Saho women are veiled and secluded according to Mohammedan practice. The Asaorta, particularly, have a high standard of Islamic knowledge.²⁸

¹⁸ Pollera, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, see above, p. 158.

²⁵ Pollera, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

²⁶ The Dassamo are a section of the *Mintfere*.

²⁷ Conti Rossini, 1937, p. 141.

²⁸ Pollera, *op. cit.*, p. 275.