GIORGIO BANTI   MORENO VERGARI

THE *NAZME*:
A GENRE OF RELIGIOUS POETRY OF THE ERITREAN SAHO*

1. INTRODUCTION

Saho is an East Cushitic language spoken in northern Ethiopia and in Eritrea, south of Asmara and Massawa down to the Afar depression. It displays many similarities with ^cAfar,[1] with which it forms a dialect continuum, with considerable more diversity within its northern, i.e., Saho section, than within ^cAfar. There are ca. 190,000 native speakers of Saho in Eritrea, and 30,000 in Ethiopia.[2] An unknown number of speakers live in the diaspora, mainly in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, South Africa, the UK, Sweden, Germany, the USA, and Australia.

The Eritrean government declared Saho one of the nine national languages of the country (Department of Education 1991), and has produced a significant number of school books and other teaching materials in the new Latin orthography that has been chosen for it. Previously, Saho had been used only as an oral language, and just marginally for written texts (see Banti – Vergari 2008, 2013 [2010]). Unless specified differently, all the Saho words in this paper are spelt according to this new official orthography, whose main peculiarities are the following:

VV		double vowels stand for long vowels;
c	[ʕ]	Arabic ^c*ayn*, a voiced pharyngeal fricative;
ch	[ʧʼ]	a palatal ejective affricate;
č	[ʧ]	a voiceless palatal affricate;
dh	[ɖ]	a voiced retroflex stop;
gn	[ɲ]	a palatal nasal (only in loanwords);
j	[ʤ]	a voiced palatal affricate (only in loanwords);
kh	[x]	a voiceless velar fricative (only in loanwords);
q	[kʼ]	a velar ejective stop;
qh	[xʼ]	a velar ejective fricative (an allophone of *q*);
rh	[ɽ]	a voiced retroflex flap (an allophone of *dh*);
sh	[ʃ]	a voiceless palatal fricative;

[1] Also known as Danakil or *dancalo* in the older Italian literature, e.g., Candeo (1893).
[2] As estimated in Lewis – Simons – Fennig (2013). For Ethiopia see also the official data from the 2007 Ethiopian Census: <http://www.csa.gov.et/pdf/Cen2007_firstdraft.pdf>.

th	[t']	an alveolar ejective stop;
ts	[s']	an alveolar ejective fricative;
x	[ħ]	Arabic *ḥā'*, a voiceless pharyngeal fricative.

In addition to this, the umlaut is used for distinguishing nouns with a final high tone in some minimal pairs such as *yi barha* [ji báɽa] 'my son, my male child' vs. *yi barhä* [jí baɽá] 'my daughter, my female child' (see also Vergari – Vergari 2003; Banti – Vergari 2005, 2010)

Saho oral literature[3] is badly understudied. The only scholarly survey published until now is a short entry on this topic in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Morin 2010), even though studies on a few of its genres have been published previously by the same author (Morin 1995, 1999). Individual texts and collections of texts have also been published by Reinisch (1889), Plazikowsky – Wagner (1953), and some Saho authors such as *abba* Täsfay (2000), and Abraahim (2005, 2009).

Four major groups of genres can be identified in Saho oral poetry: *cadar*, traditional folk poetry and songs, modern popular songs, and *nazme*. Major authorial poetry is called *cadar*. It is frequently aimed at achieving a political or social effect, e.g., as an instrument of war or peace and reconciliation. It is also used for debating social issues or for praising one's clan or oneself. It was formerly associated with great oral poets like Farhekoobe (died 1867 or 1868) and *Xajji* Saalix Xindago (died in 1993), and was closely linked to the traditional social structure. *Xajji* Saalix Xindago also spoke about the liberation struggle against the Ethiopian rule. *Cadar* performances involved chanting, and they still do so in cassettes by famous poets that are circulated in Eritrea and in the Saho diaspora. However, there are only minor poets now, who compose *cadar* about nationalism, social issues, etc.; when performed, their poetry is declaimed, not chanted. Contemporary *cadar* poems are published, e.g., in school books, and on websites.

Minor, mostly non authorial poems and songs are performed on important occasions such as weddings, traditional dances, while working, etc. Their genres are:

a) wedding songs and dances: *margaddiino*, *laale*, *saarigoble*, *horra*, etc.,
b) work songs sung mainly by women while churning butter, grinding cereals and other seeds, etc.
c) lullabies.

Notice however that some *margaddiino* wedding songs have also been composed by major *cadar* poets such as the above mentioned Fedhekoobe. During the second half of the 20th century the liberation movements transformed traditional genres such as wedding and dance songs by fitting them with political texts on nationalism and the armed struggle.

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[3] The authors of this paper prefer to use this term instead of "orature", because most of its genres are characterized by several clearly textual features as shown, e.g., by Barber (2005, 2007).

During the 20th century the development of popular culture in the Eritrean and Ethiopian towns, as well as in the diaspora communities, created new occasions for male and female singers who perform in several languages to the accompaniment of modern music. Their songs (Saho *qanna* sg. < Tigrinya and Geᶜez *qānnā* 'melodious song, chant', related to Arabic *ġinā'* 'song, singing') are about love, the diaspora, nationalism, and the other topics of contemporary Eritrean songs. They are heard on the radio, on cassettes, etc., or are performed at festive events and major parties. Well-known modern performers who sing in Saho are Abrar Osman, Axmad Mansur, Cumar Xadbar, Maxmud Kaxano, Faathuma Suleeman, etc.

2. THE *NAZME*

2.1. *Historical background: the penetration of Islam in the Saho area and the development of the religious poetry*

Moslem presence in what is today Eritrea, is quite old:

−   early 7th century: first arrivals of followers of Mohammed at the Axum court;
−   early 8th century: Moslems under the ᶜUmayyad Caliphate occupied the Dahlak Islands;
−   12th and 13th century: the Dahlak Islands became the seat of an independent sultanate;
−   1557: Ottoman occupation of Massawa and subsequent introduction of Ḥanafism as the official school of religious law (*maḏhab*) in the country (Miran 2005, 2007):
−   beginning of the 19th cent.: renewed missionary activity by new Sufi orders, e.g., the Ḫatmiyya, also known as Mīrġaniyya.

A leading figure in the early 19th century new Sufi movement was the Moroccan mystic Šayḫ Aḥmad b. Idrīs. Some of his pupils founded important African Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭuruq*): Muḥammad b. ᶜAlī al-Sanūsī fiunded the Sanūsiyya in Libya; Ibrāhīm al-Rašīd, the Aḥmadiyya in Somalia; and Muḥammad ᶜUthmān al-Mīrġanī the above mentioned Ḫatmiyya (or Mīrġaniyya) in Sudan and Eritrea (Bruzzi 2010: 22).

These new *ṭuruq*, "together with the revitalization of the older orders, such as the Qādiriyya and the Shādhiliyya" (Miran 2005: 184), heavily influenced the Eritrean region especially during the first half of the 19th century. Starting from the Tigre ᶜAd Shaykh and Nā'ib families, the Ḫatmiyya acquired a growing importance in great part of the country, also converting several Christians and creating a broad based cross-ethnic organization.

Among the Saho, some clans such as the Faqhat Xarak of the Saho Minifire, and the so-called "holy families" of the Malxina Micimbara, had and still have an important role in all religious activities.

Religious hymns, generally associated with this popular Sufi Islam, are sung in Saho by sheikhs and their followers during the Mawlid and other religious ceremonies, and are called *nazme* (< Arabic *naẓm*, literally "stringing (pearls, beads, etc.)"; in early ʿAbbāsid times *naẓm* acquired the meaning of "versifying", "versification", Van Gelder – Heinrichs 2004). They alternate with Arabic hymns, such as the *salloocalle* (< Arabic *ṣallaw ʿalēh* "may He bless him") or other readings, e.g., from the booklet *Mawlidu 'l-Nabī* ("the birth of the Prophet").

It is not known when Saho *nazme* composing and singing began, because they are mostly remembered orally. As far as known to the present authors there are no printed collections of nazme, but only occasional instances of sheikhs recording them in Ajami Arabic script.

Singing hymns in a local language is certainly quite old in Harar, where some Harari *qaṣīda*'s and other texts started to be written down in Ajami script at least in the 16th century. It is not unlikely that at least some hymns in Saho were already composed and circulated before the Sufi revival. Differently from *cadar*, many *nazme* poems are anonymous and it is thus quite difficult to attribute them to known historical figures.

2.2. *Some examples of* nazme *texts*

2.2.1. An anonymous Northern Saho *nazme*

In February 1992 one of the two authors of this paper was working in Rome with two informants from the northern Saho-speaking area of Eritrea. After transcribing and translating with them several *qanna* songs by Abrar Osman, he asked them during one session whether they knew more "serious" poetry in Saho, and one of them, Ibraahim, replied "Yes, there is *nazme*", and chanted the following one:

> *Qabre ak yan tiyadde, adox adde ullusa*
> *Lamma ak yayyaace, tiya adde raacisha*
> *Camali yoomenkoo, igirh kee tsariisa*
> *Camali yemcenkoo, qabre akah ifisha*
>
> "He (i.e., God) sends three (people) into the grave,
> Two He brings out, one He leaves inside.
> If (his) deeds were bad, scorpions and snakes;
> If (his) deeds were good, He illuminates the tomb for him"

The four lines refer to what happens to the dead when they are deposed in their tombs. The other two that are sent in with them, but are later brought out by God, are the two well-known angels of death, Munkar and Nakīr, that examine the dead and punish them, if necessary (see Wensinck 1993).

While Ibraahim chanted, he reduced all the half lines to six syllables by deleting some, but not all the final vowels that were followed by a vowel-initial word, and realized *ak yan* as *akan*. He thus actually chanted half line (1.a) as *qabr-ak-an tiyadde*, (1.b) as *adox add-ullusa*, (2.b) as *tiy-adde raacisha*, and (4.b) as *qabr-akah ifisha*. He did not drop the final vowel of *lamma* in half line (2.a), because the resulting half line would have had five syllables. There is thus an apparent metrical organization in twelve syllable lines, each of them divided by a caesura into two equal half-lines of six syllables each. In addition to this, there is rhyme at the end of each line. The pattern *-sa – -sha – -sa – -sha* may be a real *abab* pattern, even though intervocalic *-s-* and *-sh-* are allophones in many varieties of Central Saho. On the other hand, in other *nazme*'s the rhyme never changes within the same stanza, but is either *aaa(a..)* through the same short poem, or *aaa*, *bbb*, *ccc*, etc.

Diagnostic features of Northern Saho in this short *nazme* are the occurrence of *-sh-* rather than *-s-* in *raacisha* and *ifisha*, the occurrence of ejective [s'] in *tsariisa*, and the long postposition *-dde* in *tiyadde* (see Morin 1994; Banti – Vergari 2010, 2013 [2010]). One feature is probably due to the need of complying with the requirement of having six syllables in the half line: *qabre ak yan tiya* 'that which they call tomb' instead of just *qabre* 'tomb' in (1.a).

In addition to this, there is a clear-cut syntactic parallelism between (1.b) and (2.b), i.e., the second half-lines of the first two lines: both of them are N *adde* V. A still stronger syntactic parallelism is evident in (3.a) and (4.a): *camali yoomenkoo* 'if the deeds were good' vs. *camali yemcenkoo* 'if the deeds were bad'. This emphasizes the stark contrast between (3.b) N *kee* N, *igirh kee tsariisa* 'scorpions and snakes', and (4.b) N *akah* V, *qabre akah ifisha* 'He illuminates the tomb for him'. Furthermore, one can also notice that the four transitive verbs that indicate the main actions in the short poem, i.e., *ullusa* 'send down into', *yayyaace* 'brings out', *raacisha* 'leaves', and *ifisha* 'illuminates' have God as their subject, thus highlighting his role as the Agent of everything. Finally, the same word, i.e., *qabre* 'tomb' occurs at the very beginning of the first and of the last half lines in this short poem, thus opening and closing it.

2.2.2. A *nazme* by *Shekh* Soliiman Ismaacil Maxammad (Irhaafalo, Central Eritrea)

On the 27th January, 2010, the two authors were in Irhaafalo on the coast of central Eritrea, within the framework of a field work campaign of the Atlas of the Traditional Material Culture of the Saho project[4] and, among the local experts they were working with, there was *Shekh* Soliiman Ismaacil Maxammad. When one of these two authors asked him whether he knew about any instances of Saho written in Arabic script, i.e., of Saho Ajami, he answered "Yes, I write it in Arabic script". On the following day, he showed them a long *nazme* of eleven stanzas, which he had composed several years

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[4] For more information on this project, see the website of Ethnorêma:
<http://win.ethnorema.it/projects.htm>, or
http://www.ethnorema.it/progetti/Progetto%20ACMTS_Saho_marzo2012.pdf>.

earlier, and written by himself. He read it explaining its more difficult lines, and let them hear and record a cassette with a chanted performance from 1979. Here are its first three stanzas. Notice that the Saho stanzas are preceded and followed by blessings in Arabic in the chanted performance, whereas in the manuscript the line *ᶜaddada mā kāna wamā yakūnu* 'He told everything that has been and that will be' is only repeated after the first Saho stanza.

أَللَّهُمَّ صَلَى عَلَى محمدٍ   *'Allāhumma ṣallâ ᶜalâ Muḥammadin*

أَللَّهُمَّ صَلَى على محمدٍ   *'Allāhumma ṣallâ ᶜalâ Muḥammadin*

عدد ما كانَ وما يكونو   *ᶜAddada mā kāna wamā yakūnu*

'Oh God, may you bless Mohammed!
Oh God, may you bless Mohammed!
He told everything that has been and that will be'.

يَرَبِّ يُورَحمتْ كُرَحمَ واسِعَه   *Yi Rabbi yol raxmat, Ku raxma waasica*

سُقْتُلِمْ سُرَهْ إنى نَبْسِهْ ويعَا   *Sugto lem sorhah, inni nabseh weeca*

يَتَعزِّبِقدْ كُكْ حِنُ مَريْعَا   *Yi tacizzibe ged, Kok xino marhiica.*

'My Lord, be merciful with me, Your mercy is huge
5   Since I don't know what awaits me, I cry for myself
If You punish me, I can't rebel against You.'

عدد مَا كَانَا ومَا يَكونُو   *ᶜAddada mā kāna wamā yakūnu*

'He told everything that has been and that will be'.

يِنَبْ سِى يِقْفِلِى يِمْلِكَ ذُنُوْبِى   *Yi nabsi yiqhfile, yimlike zunuube*

إشِمِيَارِقٍ مَرَ يَعِيدبِى   *Ishe miyaarhige, mara yaciddibe*

يِكِلِهْ مَايَنِه كَفَنْ يِقرِبِى   *Yekkeleh mayane, kafan yiqqirribe.*

'My soul has been careless, sins prevailed
It doesn't know itself, it inflicts pain to other people
10   It has not realized that the shroud is nearby'.

عُمْرِ نُكْبَ كِتِهْ مَنْقُ حَزَن لِنُو   *Cumri nok bakiteh, mango xazan lino*

قَفْلَ نِرَدِهْ مَنْق ذُنُوْب لِى نُو   *Qafla ni raddeh, mango zunuub lino*

رَبِّ رَحِيْمْ كِنِّه كَيَّدْ رَجلي نُو   *Rabbi raxiim kinnih, Kayyad raja lino*

'Since our age has come to end, we have a great sorrow
Since heedlessness has fallen upon us, we have many sins
Since the Lord is merciful, in Him we have hope.'

It is interesting to notice that the letter *rā'* (ر) represents both [r], [ḍ], and [ɽ], and that *qāf* (ف) is used for Saho [k'], [x'], and [g]. Even though the present authors have seen no other examples of Saho Ajami texts, the same usage also occurs in Arabic texts from Eritrea when they mention Saho tribal names with *dh*, *rh*, *g*, and *qh*, and seems thus to be an established tradition in Eritrea.[5] They differ from the known traditions for writing other languages of the Horn of Africa, such as ᶜAfar, Oromo, northern and southern Somali, Harari, etc., that never represent [g] by means of *qāf*, nor [d] or any of its allophones by means of simple *rā'*. On the other hand, Arabic *qāf* is widely used for ejective [k'] all over the Horn, e.g., in Oromo, Harari, Ajami Amharic, etc. It should be also pointed out that the spelling of this *nazme* displays a considerable degree of variation, suffice it to look at how the three occurrences of *lino* 'we have' are spelt in the half lines (11.b), (12.b), and (13.b): *<linō>*, *<lī nō>*, and *<-lī nō>*, with variation between defective and *plene* spelling of [i], between writing *lino* as one or as two words, and between attaching it or not to the preceding word.

The metrical pattern is not very dissimilar from the shorter anonymous *nazme* seen above, i.e., rhymed twelve syllable lines divided by a caesura in two half lines of six syllables each. Shorter half lines such as (5.a) and (12.a) are resyllabified in the sung performance: *sug.to lem so.rha.*[ha] and, respectively, *qaf.la ni rad.de.*[hi].[6] The rhyme is -*ca* in stanza 1, -*be* in stanza 2, and the whole word *lino* in stanza 3.

The language is a variety of Central Saho, characterized by (i.) several occurrences of *z*, whereas Southern Saho has *z > d* like ᶜAfar; (ii.) the southern shorter forms *yol* 'to me', *kayyad* 'towards him', *ged* 'when'; (iii.) several occurrences of *ma-* 'not' instead of the generalized northern form *mi-*; (iv.) *sug-* 'to wait, to stay' instead of northern *cambal-* 'id.' (see Morin 1994; Banti – Vergari 2010, 2013 [2010]). The author of this *nazme* made a considerable use of Arabic loanwords, to the point that almost every line has at least one, both nouns and adjectives such as *Rabbi*, *raxma* 'mercy', *nabseh* 'for myself' dissimilated from *nafs* 'soul, self', *zunuube* 'sins' < *ḏunūb*, *kafan* 'shroud', *cumri* 'life, age', *xazan* 'grief, sorrow', *raja* 'hope', *raxiim* 'merciful'; and verbs such as *raxmat* 'be merciful', *tacizzibe* and *yaciddibe* 'punish, torment' < ᶜ*aḏḏaba*, *yimlike* 'prevailed' < *malaka* 'take over, seize', *yiqqirribe* 'is nearby' < *taqarraba* 'to get near'.

Even the nine lines of these three stanzas display several features that characterize also other genres of Saho poetry. For instance, a widespread use of repetitions, both of words such as the three occurrences of *lino* at the end of the three lines in stanza 3, and of syntactic patterns, such as [S-*h*] [(X) NP$_{OBJECT}$ *lino*] in the same stanza, where [S-*h*] represents a causal subordinate marked by the postposition -*h*. Notice also that in this

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[5] However, it has been ponted out to the present authors that there are *cadar* poems by old and contemporaty poets written in Ajami in some diaspora communities.
[6] Notice that after *sorhah* the epithetic vowel is -*a*, but after *raddeh* it is -*i*, in accordance with a well-known Saho-ᶜAfar phonological rule whereby -*a* is added after -*aC*, -*i* after -*eC* or -*iC*, and -*u* after -*oC* or -*uC*, see Hayward (1983).

stanza repetition makes it possible to highlight the contrast with the final half line of (13): 'we have great sorrow', 'we have many sins', 'we have hope in Him'.

Vowel assonance is used for marking the four corners of stanza 1: *i-a-i* in *yi Rabbi* and *yi tacizzibe*, and *aa-i-a ~ a-ii-a* in *waasica* and *marhiica*, but also for highlighting contrasted words such as *yiqhfile* 'has been careless' and *yimlike* 'has prevailed' in line 8 (together with the chiasm NP$_{SUBJECT}$ V - V NP$_{SUBJECT}$), or *xazan* 'grief' and *raja* 'hope' in half lines (11.b) and (13.b). Both horizontal and vertical alliteration is also frequently used, to give structure and coheresion to the lines and the stanzas, e.g., *Rabbi - raxmat - raxma* in line (4), *sugto - sorhah* in (5.a), *waasica - weeca* at the end of (4.b) and (5.b), *Rabbi - raxiim - raja* in (13). Parallelism in the number of syllables of the words in matching half lines can also be observed, as in *Ku raxma waasica* and *Kok xino marhiica* in (4.b) and, respectively, (6.b), that are | σ σσ σσσ ||; or the pattern | σσ σσ σσ || that occurs in (11.b), (12.b), (13.a), and (13.b).

Finally, the pronouns *yi* 'my, me' on the one hand, and *Ku* 'Your' and *Kok* 'against You' are placed in a parallel and strongly contrastive pattern at the beginning of each of the two half lines of the first and last lines of stanza 1 in order to emphasize the opposition between the speaker and God, his Addressee.

3. CONCLUSIONS

It has been shown above that the *nazme* can be quite short or somewhat longer religious poems, either divided into stanzas such as *Shekh* Soliiman's one, or forming a continuous sequence of eight - ten lines as some other *nazme*'s that have not been discussed here for reasons of space. The metrical pattern of rhyming twelve syllable lines divided by a caesura after the sixth syllable is known to occur also elsewhere in the Horn of Africa; for instance, Islamic Oromo *manzuuma*'s from the region of Harar and from Wollo (see Mohammed 2012), as well as Amharic Islamic poetry (see Cerulli 1926; Drewes 1976, 2007; Gori 2007; Wetter 2012) display the same pattern. But rhymed lines or half-lines of six or, more rarely, five syllables have also been described in non religious poetry from traditionally Christian communities of northern and central Ethiopia and Eritrea, e.g., by Cohen (1924), Conti Rossini (1942: 223 ff.), Wedekind (1991), Getie (2001), etc. It thus appears that the metrical organization of the Saho *nazme* is shared by other Moslem communities in the north and center of the Horn of Africa, and that it is rooted in the poetic traditions of that region.

The Saho-speaking heartland was heavily hit during the war against the Ethiopian occupation and by drought. Now it is increasingly depopulated by urbanization and emigration to other areas of Eritrea and to other countries. As a consequence the occasions for performing many traditional oral genres are diminishing. However, besides new forms of oral genres linked with modern popular culture such as modern songs, old genres such as the *nazme* seem to bee quite alive, since they are closely associated to traditional religious life both in rural and urban communities. Audio recordings of *nazme* are sold in music shops in the major towns of the Saho-speaking

area. The spread of literacy also encourages educated Sahos to record the major traditional genres such as *nazme*, *cadar*, and *margaddiino*, which are published in books, magazines and websites.

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