

An Ethno-Historical Survey of the Irob Agri-Pastoralists of North Eastern Tigray (Ethiopia)

by Tsegay Berhe GebreLibanos, Lecturer, Addis Ababa University; PhD stipendait (NTNU), Norway

Abstract

Eastern Tigray had experienced a long series of population movements and displacements over centuries. This explains the current peopling of diverse Saho-Speaking (Irob, Hazo, Dabrimeta, etc.), Afar and Tigrigna speaking communities in 'Agama' area. The Irob community is particularly at the crossroads of different ethno - religious milieu of the Red Sea hinterland though confined to the northeastern escarpment. Irob land is very small area with a small population of about 20,000 yet stills a striking micro-model of intensive ethno-historical interactions, which characterize the area of 'Agama' as a whole. The Irob have become a bi-lingual community with Saho and Tigrigna being spoken by most of them. Almost all Irobs feel a special sense of community with the Tigrayans and strongly deny ancestral affinities with their Saho neighbors sharing the same language. On the otherhand, though Irob nomenclature has been largely Tigreanized, interestingly still their usually long genealogies bear names of mixed Saho, Tigrayan - Christian and Muslim are abound.

The Irob were assorted into three clan organizations: Adgada Are', Buknayto Are', and Hassaballa Are' from north to south. In terms of religion, most Adgada - Hassaballa adhered to Orthodox Christianity while the Buknayto remains distinctly Catholics. Irob socio-political organization has yet to be studied. However, it appears to have been based on an egalitarian system where power largely rested in the public assembly which in turn delegated it to the council of elders. The periodic election of a clan head was being endorsed through a public ceremony known as 'rada'. Elected clan heads usually bear the title of 'ona', though Hassaballa clan leaders tend to adopt the more highland inspired title of 'shum'. Be it the ona or the shum, however, exercised similar jurisdiction as supreme judges over their respective clans. They had certain socio-economic privileges over access to the best lands, called 'saro', and collected tributes from non - Irob Saho settlers (Dabrimela, Gaaso, Hazo) called 'hatsi', for exploiting grazing lands. The Irobs had developed a largely self - contained and elaborate mechanism of local dispute settlement run by customary courts. This helped them to retain their local political autonomy with little highlanders' interference until the 18th century. Since then, the Irob increasingly began to participate in the Tigrayan political, administrative and military affairs

The Hassaballa Irob even even imposed their own dynasty over the entire Tigrigna - speaking communities during the Zemene Mesafint (1786 - 1853). Their typical representative Dajjasmach Subagadis (r. 1822-31) who ascended the Tigrayan overlordship grew so ambitious that he challenged the position of the Yejju Oromo War-lords at Dabra Abbay (1831). Though his bid to assume the power brokerage of Gonderine Imperial politics failed, his descendants ruled 'Agama' until the 1974 Revolution. Irobland thus used to be a safer hideouts both for political and religious dissenters through out history. Recent political developments in the Horn like the Hague border rulings are, however, sending worse signals threatening the security of the Irob ethnic minority (instead of protection). This hasty imposition of artificial border, which scrambled the small Irob territory into two belligerent states seem not only against local realities but is bound to split the same households and jeopardize their overall survival strategies as a community. And such a gross violation of minority rights in the era of globalization defeats the causes of Universal Human Rights, justice, peace and democratization in the Horn of Africa.

I. The Physical Environment

The Irob country is situated in traditional Agamä Awrajja, at the north eastern corner of Tegray. It lies at the strategic northern escarpment or at the cross-roads between the Red Sea Coast and the interior of southern Eritrea, on the one hand, and the Northern Tegrean plateau on the other. In the context of Agamä, Irob land that traditionally used to be a sub-district of Gulomakhäda has now become a separate district in its own right. However, despite some frontier changes at different times, the hard core of 'Agamä-Proper' seems to have been kept intact over the centuries. Irob land remains among the many mountainous areas in Ethiopia yet receiving the smallest of the mean annual rainfall (300mm)¹ thereby impeding prospects of agricultural activities. It is drained by the rivers of Eastern Agamä flowing down into the Dalul depression so as to rekindle some minimal options of survival in the arid zones inhabited by the 'Afar-'Hazo-Irob pastoralists.² Water utilization has often been a source of grave conflicts within the Northeastern (Tigarayan-Eritrean) escarpment and the attached lowlands.

An important historical trend among the lowlanders has been the evident process of transformation from pastoralism to sedentary agricultural ways of life. Thus, the 'Afar, Hazo, and Irob, all living in the predominantly lowland milieu of the eastern drainage area, gradually adopted farming producing, particularly maize, though their habitat does not easily lend itself to crop production.³ The Irobs in particular have developed their own techniques of trapping water and silt flowing off the Northeastern Ethiopian highlands down to the Danakil desert. Their newly introduced "garden farms" out of the incredibly steep and rocky terrains helped to constantly improve their land use system. More significantly, however, most of the Irob people produce top quality honey (white), which they often sell in the local markets. In early times, they used to pay the heavy tributes imposed on them by government officials, in the form of honey.⁴ Acute land shortage curtailed farming in Irobland. Persistent droughts, which are a constant threat for the survival of the human and livestock population, have greatly affected the agricultural production of Irobland. Ecological stress and environmental degradation reduced the entire Irobland into a marginal land; devoid of much of its original vegetation, wild life and soil fertility. Recurrent famines have, thus, induced mass migrations.⁵

II. Language, Traditions of Origin and Settlement

There are a host of theories on the origin, settlement and linguistic affinity of the Irobs. The Irob are bi-lingual community entirely speaking Saho and largely conversant in Tigrigna. Lazarist Missionaries, like Fr. Gasparini (1940s) have outwardly perceived the lexical similarities of "Irob" and "Europe" to assign European identity for the Irobs⁶. This Lazarist tendency partly seems to have been aimed at forging affinities with the native Catechumens. And yet, oral historians have simply prescribed this version as an official group memory. On the other hand, Scholars such as Merid argue the Saho speakers as the vanguard group of Afar migration toward the north and the high land escarpments⁷. Though Afar and Saho are regarded as highly interrelated communities, anthropologists like that of Lewis, however, underlines the term "Saho" as essentially a 'linguistic classification' with various communities differing in origins, organization, tradition, laws and customs.⁸ Apparently, the Saho never came under a single political entity. Gigar even extends this view further as he states that the Saho-speaking peoples occupy a continuous territory extending from the Massawa-Ginda'e road in the north to Koräm-Allamata in the south and from the edges of the plateau in the west to the Dänkälia plains in the east. Besides the prominent Sahos living in Eritrea (i.e. Assaurta, Taroa, Gaaso, and Hazo), he appears to include in this category such communities as the Balassua, Dabani, Dahimela, Gera'hinto, and Irob stretching from the valleys of La'asigedä in Irobland to the southern tip of Dalul and apparently further south to Allamata.⁹ Apparently, the Irob regard themselves as ethnic Tigrayans rather than Sahos.

The Irob are mostly Christian either Orthodox or Catholic - both living along and below the escarpment in the neighboring Eritrean and Ethiopian provinces of Shimazana and 'Agamä respectively. The majority are, however, settled in the district of Irobland, in 'Agamä occupying

fourteen qäbälés where they are assorted into three major clans, from north to south: the Adgada, Buknayto and 'Hassäbälla.¹⁰ The land of the Irob is a very small, perhaps not exceeding 1700 square kilometres with a population of about 20,000.¹¹ There is paucity of sources on the earliest occupants of Irobländ either. However, the story of its peopling made it appear a micro-model of intensive ethno- historical interactions, which characterize 'Agamä as a whole. Despite its small size, the land of the Irob has rich traditions about the early settlement of several pre-Irob communities or peoples including: Aydol'a', Asyndaytit, Asehaba, Balaw, Kalaw, Doba, Edoklus, Hamado, Kayyayta and Noba. While most of them were either assimilated by the predominant Irob or displaced, traces of Aydola, Doba and Kayyayta are still available in Irobländ. ¹²

On the traditions of origin of the Irob, there is nothing more than we have in Conti Rossini and Gigar Tasfay.¹³ There is a persistent Irob tradition that their ancestors came from the Keltä-Awlaélo districts of Serae, Wämbäarta, Désa and Agula'e.¹⁴ This is complemented by similar traditions among some Keltä Awala'elo communities tracing their origins from the two famous Irob founding fathers, Summä and Hanäkä. The existence of the place name "Seraé" both in Irob country and in Keltä-Awlaelo, could probably indicate some sort of a shared past. The Irob also report that one of their clans, Kayyayta, had settlements at Berki, Agulaé, in Keletä-Awla'elo¹⁵ where, however, there are no traces of them today. Beyond the Tegreñña-speaking areas of Keltä-Awla'elo and other highland districts, Irob traditions trace ancient clan relations with the Afar inhabitants of the district of Dalul, the descendants of Amir.¹⁶ The existence of scattered groups of the Irob clan, Mattana, in the Saho and Afar territory of Dalul and Barahle also points to the same conclusion.

Most Irob and Eggäla informants trace their genealogies to as far as 24 generations when their founding father, Wärädä-Mehret moved from the area of Sera'e, eastern Keltä-Awla'elo. There is a place called Amba-Sera'e in Buknayto area which elderly informants say was named after the Kelta-Awla'elo site. From the number of generations, the last part of the 13th century seems to be the most likely period referred to. That period is noted for a major dynastic change in highland Ethiopia and probable displacement of communities associated with it. In this connection, Merid relates the movements of Egga'la and Irob from the south according to traditions from 'Hamassén, Akalä-Guzay and 'Agamä.¹⁷ The various branches of the Eggäla have been more or less completely integrated into the sedentary communities they joined in the highland; while the Irob, though highly assimilated, they still appear pastoralists (partly for shortage of agricultural lands) and kept up their bonds with the Afar. But what appears to be clear is that the Eggäla and the Irob have been in occupation of their current habitats ,at least ,since the 16th century.¹⁸

In fact, one can conclude that the Irobs were at the centre of ethnic, cultural, political and economic crossroads in the Red sea hinterland. The Saho dialect of the Christian Irob has many words and expressions borrowed from Tegreñña; just as the Afar along the Coast speak an Afar dialect mixed with lots of Arabic expressions. An increasing number of the Saho-speaking Däbriméla, Ga'aso, Hazo and Irob clans living in the 'Agamä escarpment have adopted Semitic speech and participated in the economic, political, administrative and military affairs of the highland state in North Eastern Tegräy, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁹ The Irob, in particular, not only become a bi-lingual community (speaking both Saho and Tegreñña) but also adopted a lot of the customs and the socio-political system of highland Tigreans. Their nomenclature has been largely Tegreanized. In their usually long genealogies names of mixed Saho, Tegrean, Christian and Muslim origins abound. The Irob have ancient traditions reflecting close connections with the Christian courts. The most integrated among them have been the Hassaballa, who were providing leaderships as chiefs and sub-chiefs of 'Agamä.²⁰

III. Socio-Political Organization

3.1. Local administration

Irob traditional socio-political organization has not yet been studied. However, it appears to have been based on an egalitarian system. Power largely rested in the public assembly, which delegated it to the council of elders. The latter played an important role in the society. An election committee of five men reputed for their “honesty” would be first elected by the society in which, however, women and minority of groups excluded from participation. The council of elders carefully selected a plausible clan head candidate with demonstrated personality capable of keeping the society intact.²¹ Then, the clan head assumes the title of Ona. ‘Hazo clan heads also carry the same title. The accession of the Ona was usually accompanied with an elaborate ritual that involved the slaughtering of fattened oxen, the best part of the meat, and mead being served to the Ona.²²

The Ona remained supreme judge of his people, with politico-administrative and military mandate. He seems to have been helped by such subordinate chiefs as ‘hanäyta²³ in times of military operations and recently by Ciqa Šum and quadärä in administrative affairs and tax levying, probably since the 19th century.²⁴ It was apparent that a non-Irob member can not often attain the title of Ona among the Irob. An Ona remained in power until his death so long as he did not commit serious offences or that his ill command entailed defeats or incur heavy casualties to his clan members. Being thus removed from power would be the highest form of penalty and disgrace for his sub-clan (kinship), to be subsequently disqualified from candidacy for series of rounds to come.

The office of Ona, theoretically a temporary position, had been retained for relatively long periods of time by stronger sub-clan or family, especially amidst the Hassäbälla group. Intensive interaction with the highland socio-political system induced some individuals to seek their father’s office on a hereditary basis.²⁵ An Ona had certain economic privileges due to his position. Onas used to retain the best lands locally called saro.²⁶ Saro lands were known to have existed in Gäräsa, Maga’uma, La’haysah, Moro and Abakio, all in Buknayto Are.²⁷ They also used to retain fractions of the occasional tribute levied by the central government, particularly after the reign Dajjasmach Wubé of Tigray and Semen(1831-55). But more importantly, the onas used to levy local taxes called ‘haši in the forms of honey, butter or goats. ‘Haši was being paid as a sort of fäsäs²⁸ on local communal grazing lands used by non-Irob minority groups of Dabriméla, Dassamo, Ga’aso and Hazo inhabiting Irob land. The immigrants however, gradually began to dominate the Irob in affluence. Among the noted Buknayto Onas in the 19th century were Ona Kumanit, ‘Hanäyta Sa’eru, Ona Boka, and Ona Wäldä Giorgis who appeared roughly to be contemporary with Subagadis, Wubé, Tewodros and Yohannes, respectively.²⁹

3.2. Dispute Settlement

Indigenous dispute settlement among the Irob is a rather crucial research theme that requires separate analysis than could otherwise be addressed by this paper. Yet, in a bid to give general reflections, it can be said that the Irob had self-contained conflict management system (along with vital social institutions) that sustained local inter-communal relations for centuries. Irobs essentially used to settle disputes via their own customary courts with out seeking justice from highland sovereigns. Traditional dispute settlement mechanisms treated all cases ranging from trivial offences, moral and physical damages, to serious against society such as murder.³⁰ The latter could either be settled through blood price (goma)³¹ or the assassin may be stoned to death (Kumtida).Kumtida³² involved throwing of stones on the guilty starting by the culprit’s own closest relations. The whole intention was to check blood feud. Though Subagadis, Yohannes IV and the Catholics strongly objected to this tradition of death penalty, the practice continued well until the 20th century.³³

IV. Conflict and Cooperation with Neighbors

The Afar-Saho speakers with disdain often perceived political integration with the highlanders

for they associated it with the “political tyranny”. They even resent interference in their local political autonomy and “economic plunders” in the form of tribute and taxation. The Irob, with the exception, to some extent, of the Buknayto Are, however, increasingly began to participate in high land political, administrative and military affairs since the 18th century. In fact, their active involvement in the Orthodox church affairs dates back at least to the 15th century when the ‘Hassäbälla clan head, a certain Buda Subagadis, reportedly gave asylum to the Stephanite “Heresy”(led by Abba Estifanos) in Gunda-Gundo.³⁴ The growing Irob identification with the Israelites indeed seems to be an indication of the old religious Christian culture they share mainly with the Amhara-Tegrean peoples. All Irobs feel a special sense of community with the Tegreans and strongly deny ancestral affinities with their Saho neighbours who share the same language; yet they indirectly admit the Afar of Dalul-Désa-Wombärta as their brethren via ‘Amir and Mismar, reported brothers of Wärädä Mehrät, and ‘Hanakä.³⁵(See Appendix I)

4.1. Aspects of Trans frontier Raids

Inter-ethnic conflicts remained an inherent feature since very long. The main factors of conflict that had long engaged the Irobs and their neighbors were: territorial expansion, rivalries over scarce resources; and raids and counter-raids with the consequent blood feud. Irobs seem to have fought much against their neighboring Afar-Saho-Tegrean communities to firmly establish themselves in Irobland along the river valleys of Gunda

Gundo, Endälli and its tributaries.³⁶ Overlapping claims over local resources (land, pasture, water, forest and fire woods) tended to sustain hostilities. For instance, Afar ‘Hazo-Irob clans had overlapping claims over the fertile Day sä’alä, Aynadib, ‘Assagara, and Ad’aro areas where there were intermittent clashes. Similar conflicts existed for centuries over Wangabo, Makhata, Assagaga, Monoxoito and Kulmusgada along the traditional Irob- Shimazana(Eritrea) borders, which was worsened due to the recent Ethio-Eritrean crisis. ³⁷

Frontier conflicts were more exacerbated by the hostile custom of raids locally known as Boylia (in Saho), Gaz (Afar) and Gäzi’e (Tegreñña).³⁸The rationale for boylia or Gaz and sustained feuds include territorial/grazing expansion or annexation of “ no man’s land”, a need to spare one’s own cattle (at other’s expense) in times of crisis; rituals of cutting genitals for qualifications of manhood and the pride of corporate clan protection from external attacks .³⁹ The title of ‘Hanäyta (‘Hanta) was often reportedly given to Irob or highland individuals who successfully avenged the death of their relatives or compots. But since the encounters were usually with the Muslim Afar-Hazos, it signaled impressions(to the latter) that ‘Hanta refers to killers of Muslims. The last major inter clan warfare (involving Gaaso, Irob, Afar and Hazo) took place in the reign of Yohannes IV (r. 1872 - 89). Hanayta Hagos, son of then Ona Wäldä giyorgis (of Buknayto Are) got his title because he avenged the Gaaso who killed his brother. ⁴⁰

The mutual warfare and distrust among the lowlanders made them vulnerable to the raids of highland chiefs in the guises of tribute/ tax collection. Apparently, the Afar-Saho lowlands served as vital hide outs for political and religious dissidents, as the areas lay some what beyond the effective politico-administrative jurisdiction of national and regional courts.⁴¹ Several highland bandits mobilized the Afar-Saho lowlanders and made the low-lying areas bases of their military operations against political rivals. Lowlanders on their own part sought highland bandits as allies in their raids of the much-coveted fertile highland areas. For instance, personalities like Subagadis, Ras Araya, Yohannes IV and Arägawi Subagadis in their days of rebellion used to raid not only the lowland habitats of Assaurta, Dabrimila, Ga’aso and Hazo but also highland ‘Agamä, ‘Asbi-Dära, Endärta, Araya and ‘Haramat as well as the thriving trade routes. ⁴² They all had once developed intimate relations with lowlanders in those ways and often cemented them by significant marriages.

Nevertheless, such alliances between lowland pastoralists and highland rebels not only strained inter-clan relations but also jeopardized the safe conduct of the coastal trade routes and the

process of tribute collection. This triggered disastrous government reprisals. In Irobland, the Catholic missionaries had a hard time restraining their followers from Boylia, Kumtida, intermarriage with Muslims, and similar other social customs, specially after the coming up of Abba Yosef (Gruson), in the 1890s who is said to have succeeded a great deal in their connection.⁴³

Ethnic relations in Northeastern Tigray were full of paradoxes rather than mere conflict. At times, they were even more characterized by harmonious political, economic, social and cultural interdependence. Lowlanders appeared to have adopted a conventional mechanism of intermarriage that tolerated women assuming the religion of their husbands. This promoted marriage interactions even with highlanders. Cross-ethnic marriages acted as a catalyst for the diffusion of ideas, technics, goods, customs, and values, which modified the prevalent cultural milieu of both interacting communities. It also served as a stratagem of access to some grazing or farmlands at the edges of the plateau or in the escarpment. The net result was the evolution of mixed Christian-Muslim communities in such areas as 'Ayga, 'Endäh, Gäblän, Marwa, and Säwnä where highland Christian culture and lowland Muslim culture meet face to face.⁴⁴

4.2. From Interaction to Preponderances: An overview of Hassabala-Irob Hegemony Over Tigray

The history of Eastern Tigray witnessed, among others the gradual population incursions, assimilation and integration of the lowland Saho speaking Irobs into Highland Tigrigna speaking communities of Agamä and Kilta Awlaelo. This scenario particularly favoured the Hassaballa Irobs to expand and achieve a clear political hegemony over their neighbors since the late 18th century. There were also mutual inter-clan rivalries amongst the Irobs as well. While the Adgada clan seems to have become strong allies in Hassaballa's expansionist scheme, the Buknayto Are' appeared more reluctant if not hostile. They only compromised with the emerging Hassaballa chiefs in return to retaining their own internal autonomy. ⁴⁵

In the early 1800s, the prominent Irob warrior, Dajazmach Subagadis Woldu prevailed over Agamä and fought fierce wars that paved his way to the Tigrayan over lordship (including highland Eritrea) in the 1810s. Subagadis (r.1822-31), who effectively mobilized the Afar-Saho lowlanders, eventually succeeded Ras Woldeselassie (c.1780-1816) as the master of Tigray, at the heydays of the Zamana masafint Ethiopia. His reign thus clearly marked Irob political preponderance in the Tigrean politics. His further growing political ambitions for regional hegemony, however, brought him into head-on collusion with the Yäjju overlords of northwestern Ethiopia at the battle of Dabra Abay (February 1831).⁴⁶ The battle cost him both his Tigrean reign and of his life. Though Subagadis' bid to assume the power brokerage of Gonderine Imperial politics failed, his descendants ruled 'Agamä' until the 1974 Revolution.

V. Epilogue

Irobland used to shelter political and religious dissenters through out history, the recent of which were the E.P.R.P. and T.P.L.F. insurgents in the Revolutionary period. In fact, the Irobs have always paid for it dearly. They are, however, most affected by the recent outbreak of Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998-2000. Next to Badime, Irobland became the prime target of Eritrean invasion and the consequent destructive high-tech warfare leaving the Irobs between the "hammers and anvils". Their fate will be worse if the rather hasty "cut-and paste type" of the Hague Border Commission's Ruling (April 2002), that partitioned Irob territory into Eritrea and Ethiopia, is rigidly implemented, without modification. In its desperate search for the hypothetical River Muna (of 1902 Treaty), the Commission has irrationally christened valleys (such as Midri Ruba by Berbere-Gado!) only to impose new identity on the Irob minority (despite their strong objections), dislocate their households and expose them to Eritrean Government reprisals, a government whose occupation they bitterly fought in the 1998-2000war. The legacy of this unholy settlement will certainly introduce yet a new factor (one may call it the "Hague

factor”) of sustaining conflicts into the volatile Horn of African Region. The Hague ultimately benefited neither the peoples of Eritrea nor of Ethiopia nor the goals of the UN’s four year-old costly peacekeeping mission. Alas Irobs are the first but certainly not the last victims sacrificed on the “altar” of the Hague (if not the “Hell” as the Irob elite referred to it). It is not a matter of sheer territory; it is all about people’s destiny and their fundamental human rights to life, protection and security. They have become vulnerable hostages in the rather grand inter-state power politics. At this critical moment, I would sum up by declaring my pessimism (even at risks of value judgment) that if the Hague fails to reconsider its fatal decision to day, the Irobs might be compelled to retain their rights to Ethiopian identity, peaceful or otherwise (And this is all the more worrisome in view of future stability in the region). They have already taken a stand as a community not to be treated as hostages of interstate belligerence (or power politics) and even begun protesting to the international community. Thus, I take this opportunity to call upon the Regional and Global political actors to act more responsibly on the destiny of Irob agro-pastoralists (and not to undermine their plea) before inviting worse war!