

The Settlement Patterns and Tribal Structure

The people referred to as Saho historically occupied the Red Sea coast (Bure Peninsula, Gulf of Zula, and Semhar Region) and the southern region of the highlands (Akele Guzay and Seraie). They were among the first to feel the effects of the South Arabian migrations that traversed their territory from around 700 B.C. onward, advancing from the Bure Peninsula to the highlands of Akele Guzay and Seraie (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 26). The areas inhabited by the Saho became an intermediate zone of international trade between the peoples of the Arab World, Persia, India and the Far East and part of their commercial trade networks. The Saho and the Afar were centrally placed to become participants and players in this great socio-cultural interaction. The foreigners settling in the coastal areas intermingled with the local Cushitic population and were eventually absorbed by them.

It is believed that the present distribution of the Saho speaking ethnic group in Eritrea is the result of repeated migrations of different Cushitic and Semitic groups throughout the Horn of Africa. Today, the majority of the Saho inhabit Eritrean territory, although some Saho communities are found in Ethiopia's Tigray region (Hazo, Minifere and Irob Saho). The Hassoba-Hazo settle in Djibouti, while the Saho are known as 'Seeho' in eastern Sudan, where they have their own *nazir* (chief). The Irob-Saho in Ethiopia occupy the valley of the Lassi-gade and advance up to the foothills with their flocks as far as Dabri-Damo and the upper parts of the Belessa. In Eritrea, the Saho settle in the Semhar region, especially around the Ghinda sub-zone in the north (Northern Red Sea Region). In the east, they are found in the Afar plains (Dankalia) of Samoti and Wangabo (Lewis 1969: 174; Trimmingham 1976 [1952]: 177). In the western lowlands (Gash-Barka Region), a large number of Saho settlements were established by groups that were displaced from the highlands during the reign of Haile Selassie or returned from Sudanese refugee camps following Eritrea's independence. Others were resettled from their

kebessa villages in the Southern Region to Gash-Barka by the present government, particularly in 2009.

The number of Saho living in Eritrea today is not clear, as the government has not published a census since independence. During Ethiopian domination, both the Haile Selassie and the Derg regimes relied on the demographic data collected by the British Military Administration (BMA) and manipulated them according to their respective political purposes. They deliberately underestimated the number of Saho living in the highlands due to their strategies of resettling Tigrayan migrants at places traditionally inhabited by Saho groups in today's Zoba Debub (Southern Region).

During the BMA, the number of all Eritreans was estimated at being about one million (1,031,000). They were divided equally among the Christian and Muslim faiths. The Tigrinya were the largest ethnic group, followed by the Tigre and the Saho as the third-largest population group (Trevaskis: 1977 [1960]: 132-133). This colonial estimation was politically manipulated by the administration in order to settle the tensions between Christians and Muslims on the one hand and in order to justify its policy of partition of Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan on the other hand. Other figures compiled by the United Nations Commission for Eritrea and published in the 1950s indicate that the Tigrinya-speaking population made up 46.7%, the Tigre 32.08% and the Saho 8.25% (Alemseged Abbay 1998: 23; see also Pool 1983: 178, who states that the Saho made up 6.6% of Eritreans).

Ibrahim Sultan, the chairman of the Muslim League told the United Nations' General Assembly in May 1949 that Muslims represent two thirds of the Eritrean population and that all of them supported independence. His claim was based on information collected from the leaders of the various Muslim tribes and clans and

the Muslim urban population. This result seems plausible because of the fact that at that time the pastoral and agro-pastoral communities were continuously on the move in search of pasture, crossing the borders to the neighboring countries. Therefore, they were not adequately registered by the administration, unlike the settled peasant groups. Clan leaders asked by the administration to present figures of their clan members were reluctant to display their real numbers and rather tried to circumvent the registration of people and animals for reasons of tax avoidance. Another reason was that the counting of animals was a cultural taboo among many nomadic groups such as the Saho, Afar, and Beni Amer and was seen as attracting the 'Evil Eye' (*hassad*).

The current Eritrean government continues to rely on the old numbers collected by the BMA and estimates the population as being divided equally between Christians and Muslims without presenting any recent statistical data. The Eritrean Government still claims that the share of Tigrinya is about 50% and of the Tigre about 33%, while they estimate the share of the Saho around 3 to 5%. They generally play down the numbers of ethnic minorities in order to strengthen the position of the dominant Tigrinya group. It is interesting to note that even the colonial estimation of the Saho's share of the population (6.6% of one million) is not acknowledged by the present government. For instance, in Akelle Guzay, the Saho make up almost 40% of the population (Jordan Gebre-Medhin 1998: 112). Similarly, for Semhar one can estimate that the share of the Saho population is not less than 35-40%. Some recent numbers available from Eritrean sources are derived from the Ministry of Local Government in 1997, which has been defunct since 2001. The statistical material does not differentiate between religion and ethnicity, but presents an account of numbers of villages, households and individuals in the various sub-zobas (sub-regions) of the country. When we look at specific sub-zobas where the Saho clearly make up the majority of the population, the MoLG's statistics show the following numbers:

Zoba Debub (Southern Region):

- Sen'afe: 22 districts, 90 villages, 26,027 households, 88,718 individuals
- Adi Keyh: 21 districts, 54 villages, 15,957 households, 58,377 individuals
- Tsorona: 21 districts, 116 villages, 12,736 households, 41,886 individuals

Northern Red Sea Region:

- Foro: 14 districts, 85 villages, 13,067 households, 52,354 individuals
- Ghinda: 12 districts, 56 villages, 9,783 households, 39,704 individuals

This amounts to 281,039 individuals. If we assume that on average, the Saho make up about 40% of the population in these regions, their number should amount to about 112,416. This is just a selection of towns where the Saho have traditionally made up over one third of the total population. Nowadays, large numbers of them are also living in the capital Asmara, the city of Massawa and in the new settlement areas in Gash Barka where their number exceeds that of the original Saho villages in the highland. These numbers can serve as a rough indicator that there might be between 250,000 and 300,000 Saho individuals living elsewhere in the country, which contradicts the government's estimation that the Saho make up less than 5% of a population estimated around four million²³.

The Saho are organized in ten semi-autonomous tribes (*kisho*, *meela* or *qabila*), six of whom are big tribes, while the rest are smaller tribes; although some scholars falsely claim there are only five Saho tribes. Each tribe is divided into sub-tribes (*gayisha*, *harak* or '*are*'). These sub-tribes are again sub-divided into numerous clans and families (genealogical branches) known as *dik* and '*are*'. They

²³ It is important to note that the Saho today, as a consequence of the implementation of the administrative reform in 1996, are divided between three regional administrations, namely the Southern Region, the Northern Red Sea Region and Gash-Barka. This caused further marginalization and insignificance and made it more difficult for them to preserve their collective identity.

usually bear the names of their respective founding fathers (Nadel 1944: 128-129). I will use the terms tribe, sub-tribe, clan and family to describe the structure of the Saho community. Sometimes, the terms 'sub-tribe' and 'clan' are used interchangeably. Some tribes use the term 'are' to identify a clan, while others use it to identify an extended family (lineage). All the tribes and sub-tribes are socially and economically interlinked as solidarity groups and intensify their interaction during their seasonal migrations between the coastal areas and the highlands.

This does not mean that all Saho speaking tribes (*kisho*, *meela*, *qabila*) originate from the same descendant – in fact, each tribe claims different descent – but they adopted the same language and culture through historical relations and social interaction. The Irob as a Christian tribe and a bi-lingual group speaking Saho and Tigrinya feel quite distant from the Saho community and identify themselves more with the Tigrayans among whom they live, due to intermarriage and economic relations. According to the Irob intellectual Tewelde Hadgu, almost all Irob feel a special sense of community with Tigrayans and strongly deny any ancestral affinities with their Saho neighbors on the Eritrean side of the border, although they share the same language (2011: 44). Similarly, some Asaorta clans claim a different origin and don't like to be identified as part of the Saho ethnic group, although some of them admit the interrelationship of both groups, not only linguistically, but socially and culturally as well. The politicization of the ethnic affiliation of the Asaorta and the Minifere started during the Italian colonial administration, when the Saho were divided into two tribal federations, similar as those of the Afar. As a consequence of this divide and rule strategy, the competition between Nasser *Bey* and Ali *Bey*, their respective leaders, became more conflict-ridden during the BMA, when both of them claimed to speak in the name of the entire Saho community. On the other hand, the leaders of the four main Saho tribes signed a written version of their customary law in 1943, which was binding for all tribes and clans. They were authorized by all Saho tribes, including the Asaorta, which

affirms the unity of the Saho-speaking groups as one single ethnic group (see Abdulkader Saleh (ed.) 2009). In addition, they share common cultural traditions and act as solidarity groups in times of threats to their security.

The following is a detailed description of the Saho tribes, sub-tribes and clans which exist today:

1. The Minifere (the sons of Mina): Assabora, Mayshisho and Silayta are seen as the original founding fathers of the Minifere tribe, whose lineages later split up into various branches. Today, they are actually a tribal federation divided into six main sections, namely the Assabora, Ellas, Ga'aso, Rasamo, Silayta, and Sen'afe²⁴. There are also small independent sub-tribes affiliated with the Minifere (Lewis 1969: 175; Nadel 1944: 129-130), such as the Gadafur, Salmonta, Danderreh-Hadoita and Intle-Sheikh 'Are; the last one is counted among the Saho holy families who act as religious leaders and mediators of the Minifere tribes and who are highly privileged and respected. It is said that the Gadafur are of Somali origin from the tribe of Gadaburse. Most of the Minifere are settled agriculturalists and live in villages and towns. They inhabit an area in southern Eritrea that spreads between Adi Keyh, Sen'afe and the Red Sea coastal towns of Zula, Afta and Irafalo, which are known as the historical trade centers of the Saho and the seats of their political and tribal leaders.

²⁴ It is said that Assabora, Mayshisho and Silayta were the first sons of Minifere, whose descendants later spread into numerous sub-tribes and clans: 1. the branches of Silayta: Qumma-Are, Haqaqti-Are, Faqih-Harak, Helatto, Abde'aa, and Abbariyor. 2. The branches of Mayshisho: Ga'aso and Dammana. The Dammana, who are also called Dasamo, are divided into Naffi-Harak, Mooset-Harak, Abdalla-Harak, Subakum-'Are, Daily-'Are, Illayshe and Kundas. The Ga'aso are divided into: Yofish-Gayisha, Hassan-Gayisha, Shum Ahmad-Gayisha, Shum Abdalla-Gayisha, and Assa-Ismail. Some branches of the Ga'aso are Christian, such as the Zerref and Heewa. There are also small sub-tribes living among the Minifere, such as the Gadafur and Danderreh-Hadoita.

Concerning the origin of the Minifere, **one version** tells that their founding father came from Mecca in Saudi-Arabia and they are the children of Omar Ibn Alkhat-ab, similar to tales that appear in other Saho tribes' mystical histories. Accordingly, the term Mina means 'from him' (from Omar ibn Alkhatab), the 17th grandfather of Mina and the founder of the Minifere tribes. The journalist and writer Mohamed Osman Abubaker mentioned these legends in his book (Mohamed Osman Abubaker 1994: 225-226). There is, however, not any historical evidence of this interpretation. The **second version** is that the nephew of Omar al Khatab, a certain Abdul-Hai married a lady from the royal Abyssinian family while she stayed in Mecca. When she returned to her country, she was pregnant and a boy was born and baptized to Christianity. The son grew up under his mother's family and became famous; he was crowned under the name *Ras Adkam* and was assumed to be the 9th grandfather of *Ras Yessebi* who was also known as Mina, the founder of the Minifere tribes, according to oral tradition. Others narrate that Yessebi was the first son of Mina and ruled the highland of Eritrea under the name of Kanli, a claim which cannot be confirmed by historians. Today, there is still a clan by the name of Sabbit-dik (Bet Sabbe, a corruption of Yessebi), which lives in the Semhar region. Osman Saleh-Sabbe, one of the most prominent leaders of the Eritrean liberation fronts, belongs to this clan.

The **third version** claims that due to the expansion of the Ethiopian Christian Empire into the Saho area during the 12th century, a *ras* from the royal family of Gondar had a relation with a beautiful Assabora woman. The king gave the woman a ring as a symbol and said to her: 'if you give birth to a son, give him the ring as a sign that he belongs to the royal family'. A son was born, but his brothers and the Assabora relatives of the woman called him an illegal son. The mother replied to these allegations '*ak yok mina*', which means 'don't say' or 'don't call him illegal son'. The son threatened his mother that he was going to kill her if she refused to tell him who his real father was. Finally, the mother gave him the ring and told

him that he was the son of the King of Gondar and told him to go to him. The son went to Gondar with his brothers and met the *ras*. He showed him the ring and the *ras* identified him as his son and gave him soldiers and financial support in order to rule his homeland. Eventually, the young man became a dominant warrior and the founding father of a number of sub-tribes. This legend made some scholars believe that all members of the Minifere tribal federation have an Ethiopian affinity, which is not the fact. The **fourth version** claims that the ancestor of the Minifere was an ancient ruler of the Egyptians named Mina who ruled Egypt around 3,200 B.C. Even today, the term 'Mina' is widely used in personal nicknames such as 'Da-mana' (literally: 'black Mina'), which denotes a connection of 'black Mina' with the ancestral name Mina of Egypt, who is considered to be the 'white Mina'.

2. The Hazo claim that their founding fathers are three brothers named Ududda, Wa'asha, and Garanto. Their descendants later split into a number of sub-tribes and clans: the descendants of Wa'asha are known as La'assa and are divided into seven clans, each headed by a *shum* (*redanto*). The majority of them lives in the Tigray province of Ethiopia. The descendants of Garanto are divided into eight clans headed by their own respective chiefs (*redanto*): Assa-'Ali-Gayisha, Assa-Alila, Hammadi-Gayisha, Enda Ummarto, Musa-Abago, Bookitte, Hakabe-Gayisha, and Hammadi-Kayya. The only clan descending of Ududda is called Kunsubi-Fere. At the same time, and somehow contradictory, the Hazo trace their origin back to a distant ancestor from the Bani-Ummayyah family of the Quraish tribe to which Prophet Mohammed belonged, as the Taro'a and the Tigre-speaking Maria and Mensa do. All four groups claim to be of the same origin and descendants of the Bani-Ummayyah family. It is said that their ancestor escaped Abbasid domination by migrating to the Eritrean Red Sea coast with his three children after having lost his power to the Abbasids. The centers of the Hazo are Endele in the highland, and Wangabo and Ragale near the Red Sea coast. Most of their sub-tribes are agro-pastoralists and live to the east of the Minifere, migrating between

the Gulf of Zula and the river of Endeli. Their neighbors are the Afar and the Irob Saho of Tigray in Ethiopia. Some clans also practice rain-fed agriculture in different areas of Tigray, such as the La-assi valley and the riverian areas of Badda and Wangabo. They used to be involved in conflicts with the Ga'aso sub-tribe related to pasture and agricultural lands throughout the centuries (Lewis 1969: 175; Trevasakis 1977 [1960]: 15; Mohamed Osman Abubaker 1994: 228-29).

3. The Asaorta's origin remains controversial and unclear. **One version** claims that they originate from two descendants, Sikole and Geytole, from whom their five main sub-tribes were derived. They are known as Koon-*'Are*, which means 'Five Houses': the Foqroyti-*'Are*, Leelish-*'Are*, Assa-Kare Assa-Leesan and Urus-Abuusa (Nadel 1944: 127; Trimmingham 1976 [1952]: 177). There are also small tribes affiliated with the Asaorta such as the Sarma-*'Are*, Reza Mara, Baradotta and Hajji-Abkur. Lelish-*'Are* is believed to be the oldest branch, and in ancient times the chief of this group was considered the head of all the Asaorta sub-tribes, but later each of them nominated their own chief called '*redanto*' or '*shum*'. According to the **second version**, the Asaorta are of Afar origin. The Lelish-*'Are* claim that they are related to the Afar groups of Erto. Pollera also states that the Asaorta are related to the Tal-Tal, the Dankali of Erto. It is possible that their name actually derives from 'Assa-Erto' rather than from 'Assa-Wor'. The Erto belong to the larger tribal group of the Assai-Mara Afar, the 'Red People' (1996 [1935]: 160; see also Lewis 1969: 174).

The **third version**, which is favored by the Asaorta themselves, asserts an Arab origin by suggesting that all Asaorta groups are descendants of an ancestor by the name of Omar Assa-wor. They claim to be a branch of the Prophet's family of Ali ibn Taleb from the Quraish tribe. Their legend tells that the grandfather of Omar Assa-wor came to the Eritrean coast from South Arabia with a number of families and settled among the local population. According to that version, the name

'Asaorta' derives from this ancestor's name (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 160). Mohammad Osman Abubaker writes that the founder of the Asaorta group, Omar Assa-wor, came from Arabia and his place of origin is supposed to be Mecca. He settled at the Eritrean coast and his descendants merged with the indigenous Saho population (1994: 221-222). These legends indicate that the term 'Asaorta' is rather the name of a single tribe, while the term 'Saho' includes all tribes who speak the Saho language. According to Trimmingham, the name Asaorta and the names of the Hazo and Taro'a groups seem to appear in written form for the first time in the 15th century during their war with King Zara-Yacob, who tried to Christianize them by force (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 160; Trimmingham 1976 [1952]: 177).

The Asaorta are agro-pastoralists and live between the River Haddas and Salima, which means they migrate between the Red Sea coast and the highland areas of Akelle Guzay and Seraie. During the coastal rains from November to March, the Asaorta live in the plain west of the Zula Bay (Haddas); from May to July they move up to the foothills and to the western edge of the plateau, which is covered with rich vegetation at that time of the year. During the inland rainy season, the tribe moves up to the plateau itself. While they stay in the foothills, some of them engage in rainfed agricultural activities, such as planting maize, millet, and other quickly maturing crops (Nadel 1944: 128; Trimmingham 1976 [1952]: 177). In the coastal area, some Asaorta clans started cultivating on the banks of the Haddas river long time ago, using an irrigation method based on channels. The tribe shifted from a nomadic way of life towards sedentary cultivation during the Italian colonial period. When some clans adopted peasantry life on the plateau, they got involved in conflicts with the permanently settled peasants of the Tigrinya speaking groups. For the Italian colonizers, the Asaorta were particularly challenging because they opposed all foreign domination with great intensity. Thus, they enjoyed a status of quasi-autonomy, light control, and a purely nominal tribute for many years. It was not before 1933 that the Italians implemented their policy of

organizing the Saho speaking semi-autonomous tribes into two federations under recognized chiefs who were known as *Bey* (Nadel 1944: 129). The Asaorta and other tribes such as the Idda, Hassabat 'Are, Baradotta and Taro'a were under the supervision of Nasser *Bey*, while the Minifere tribes, the Dabri-Meela and other scattered Saho sub-groups were under Ali *Bey*. The colonial administration played the two tribal federations off against each other in order to strengthen their control over the Saho population and the territory they inhabited.

All of the Saho groups, including the Asaorta, are polylingual. They speak Tigre, Tigrinya, Afar and Arabic, depending on their geographical location. Some Asaorta clans were absorbed by the Tigre speaking groups of the Semhar and the Sahel regions. Due to this linguistic diversity, most of the Tigre groups in the Sahel and in the western lowlands used to call all Saho speaking groups 'Asaorta', without making any distinction between them. Generally, the name Asaorta was used not only by the Tigre but also by the Tigrinya and by the Italian colonial administration to identify all Saho speaking population groups, irrespective of their tribal background (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 26-27; Trevaskis 1977 [1960]: 15). This interchangeable use of the terms 'Asaorta' and 'Saho' is misleading. It was introduced by the Italian colonial rulers and by the British administration and is still practiced today. Even independent Saho groups such as the Taro'a, Idda, Iddefer, and Hassabat 'Are were falsely considered to be Asaorta sub-tribes for administrative purposes. Although it is not correct to subsume all Saho tribes and sub-tribes under the term Asaorta, this doesn't mean that there are no social interactions and affiliations between these groups. Social solidarity and intermarriage between them are common, and they formed alliances against foreign domination and other threats in the past.

4. The Taro'a trace their origin back to a distant ancestor of the Quraish tribe of Prophet Mohammed, more specifically to the family of Bani-Ummayah, similar to

the myths of the Hazo and those of the Mensa and Maria Tigre. According to legend, the ancestor of these four tribes was a certain Zaid who crossed the Red Sea from South Arabia and settled on the Bure Peninsula. They claim that the founding father of the Taro'a was known as Omar-Taro'a (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 102-104). The Taro'a are bilingual Saho and Tigre speakers and they are divided into two main sub-tribes, namely Moset 'Are (Bet Mosa) and Sarah 'Are (Bet Sarah). Bet Mosa is mixed and affiliated with Tigre-speaking sub-tribes in the Semhar region. There are also small Saho clans who are affiliated with the Taro'a, such as the Enda Ejello, the Sheikh Lahlahat 'Are, the Kabuta and Bet Aqail (Bet Uqail) (Mohammed Osman Abubaker 1994: 230).

The Taro'a are one of the best known Saho tribes of the area between the highlands and the coastal plain because of their bitter conflicts with their neighbors, the Tsenadegle Tigrinya-speaking group in the Segeneiti sub-zone of Akelle Guzay. They inhabit the territory between the river Haddas and Ali-gade ('Ala). They are agro-pastoralists and move between the highlands and the coastal lowlands. Between June and October, they track with their animals to the highlands of Hamassien (the mountains of Bizen, Damas and Sarat) and Akelle Guzay (the area around Decemhare and Segeneiti, especially Aligade) in search of pasture and water, while between November and February they migrate to the Red Sea coastal areas of Ghinda, Embatkalla, Ghatelay and Sahayti (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 159-160). During the rainy season, they practice rain-fed agriculture, while some clans are settled agriculturalists and cultivate twice because of the *bahri*-rains in the Northern Red Sea Region (Trevaskis 1977 [1960]: 3-4; Nadel 1944: 128-129; Lewis, 1969: 175). Today, their centers are Ghinda, Ghatelay and Agambussa, because most of the Taro'a clans were displaced from the highlands by Tigrinya groups. During the Italian colonial time, the Tsenadegle established fixed settlements in the highlands of Akelle Guzay and displaced the Taro'a by excluding

them from pasture and agricultural land. This resulted in intensive and enduring blood feuds between the two groups (Jordan Gebre-Medhin 1989: 113-114). These conflicts were limited to the Taro'a and the Tsenadegle, and did not involve the Asaorta tribe, as falsely interpreted by Favali and Pateman (2003: 147). They report the involvement of the Asaorta in a prolonged conflict between the inhabitants of the Engana district in Akelle Guzay during the late 19th century. Actually, the conflict was between the Tsenadegle and Taro'a living in this area. When Bahta Hagos was the administrator of Segeneiti under the Italians, he supported his people, the Tsenadegle against the Taro'a, which led to an intensification of the conflicts between the two groups over pasture and agricultural land. The prolonged and bitter blood feuds between the two groups could only be resolved after independence in 1996, when the Eritrean government succeeded in mediating between both groups by involving their respective traditional leaders and government representatives (Favali and Pateman 2003: 162; Gaim Kibreab 2008: 83-85).

5. The Malhina Mi'in Bara (the seven Holy Families) are the Hajji-Abkur, Intile-Sheikh-'Are, Sheikh-Mahmoud-'Are, Faqih-Harak, Akhadar-Abuusa, Sheikh-Dimbagog and Afindeeda-Sheikhs. The Sheikh-Salim-'Are and Ironnaba are also members of the Holy Families, which is due to a split of several families. It is believed that they are descendants of the same ancestor, who is supposed to be Intile-Sheikh who came from South Arabia and settled at Irafalo. His Arab name was 'Sheikh Abul 'Aineen' ('Sheikh with two eyes'), which corresponds to 'Intile-Sheikh' in Saho language. Their members live scattered among all Saho tribes as religious leaders and as mediators between the different Saho sub-tribes and clans. Each Holy Family is affiliated with one specific Saho tribe or sub-tribe. The Intile-Sheikh-'Are are the *sheikhs* of the Dasammo and Ga'aso, the Ironnaba are known as the *sheikhs* of the Hazo, the Sheikh-Salim 'Are and Intile-Sheikh-'Are are the

sheikhs of the Sen'afe clan. Dimbagog and Hajji-Abkur are the *sheikhs* of the Asaorta clans, while the Akhadar-Abuusa are the *sheikhs* of the Taro'a clans. Today the Seven Holy Families, particularly the Faqih-Harak, are in charge of the religious affairs of the Saho tribes. Among their responsibilities are teaching the *Quran*, performing rituals, blessings, marriage and funeral ceremonies. They are concerned with the social, cultural and educational responsibilities of their community and dedicate themselves to the strengthening of the unity, solidarity and cohesiveness among the different sub-tribes. The Holy Families exercise exogamous marriage and polygynie is widespread among them in accordance with the Islamic law (*Shari'a*). This practice is used to secure clan support and access to land and to strengthen their family affiliations with each of the above-mentioned sub-tribes, because they depend on the support of the clans among whom they live for their existence. Today, most of the Holy Family members are settled and practice rain-fed agriculture. Thus, they depend less on the support of the other clans, but they also lost the privileges they enjoyed before.

6. The Dabri-Meela (the people of the Dabra Mountain) are divided into two sub-tribes, the Ala-des-'Are and Labha-des-'Are. They are agro-pastoralists and settled cultivators, respectively; both groups are bi-lingual Tigrinya and Saho speakers. They live in the southern part of the Akelle Guzay region at the mountain chain of Mola in the border region near Alitena (Trimingham 1976 [1952]: 178-179; Pollera 1996 [1935]: 162; Lewis 1969: 175). Most Saho tribes know the Labha-des-'Are as 'Lab-Hat-'Are', which means 'the house of the warriors'. Together with the Ala-des sub-tribe and other small groups, they make up the main component of the Dabri-Meela tribe. The majority of the Labha-des-'Are are Christians who adopted the Tigrinya culture through intermarriage, while a number of Muslim groups are living together with them. They are settled farmers and keep a large number of animals in order to cover the needs of their subsistence economy. Their centers are Makko, Shemizana, and Monokhsaito in the Tigray

Province of Ethiopia. Since one branch of the Labha-des-‘Are called Seehorma is settled among the Irob-Saho, they have good social and family relationships. One chief (*redanto*) of this sub-tribe was called Gebre-Abraha, and a later one was Lej Aberra. On the contrary, the majority of the Ala-des sub-tribe is Muslim, but there are some Christians among them. They are agro-pastoralists and migrate from the Dabra Mountain to the mountain of Soira during dry seasons. Their centers are Assad and Shemizana, and they have good social interactions with the Hazo and Ga‘aso clans in the same area. During the Italian colonization and the British Military Administration, the Dabri-Meela tribe was affiliated with the Minifere chief Ali *Bey* like most independent scattered Saho tribes living between the highlands and the coastal area. The origin of the Labha-des-‘Are in particular and the Dabri-Meela tribe in general remains unclear, but there are three different versions - some are based on guesswork of scholars and some on local legends. **The first version** suggests an Ethiopian affiliation and says that a number of uprooted people penetrated the area around the Dabra Mountain. According to Pollera, the Dabri-Meela are

“(...) made up of very diverse elements of different origins that had all gathered around the monasteries. When the monastery fell into decline they banded together as a separate tribe and began to assert the unity of their lineages, claiming to be descendents from the same founder. Such a claim would have allowed them to strengthen their property rights to the land as first occupying the territory” (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 162).

This misleading version could be the imagination of some scholars who try to relate the origin of some ethnic groups to Abyssinian history, and the Dabri-Meela do not agree with it. It should be recalled that the Cushitic speaking groups such as the Saho, Afar, Somali and Oromo are indigenous people who lived in the area of the Horn of Africa before its penetration by the Semitic speaking groups.

The second version claims that the Dabri-Meela descent from a certain Sultan Ismail from Istanbul. It is said that Ismail reached the territory around the end of the 16th century. According to Pollera, this legend goes as follows: “(...) [S]ome tax collector or deserter of the Turkish troops in Massawa sought refuge in this remote region, a safe hermitage indeed, and created for himself a family history that would ensure him the esteem and benevolence of the local people” (1996 [1935]: 162; see also Lewis 1969: 175). This version seeks the origin of the Dabri-Meela far outside the region, which is a very common tradition among ethnic groups of the Horn of Africa who trace their ancestry back to Asia or the Arabian Peninsula. These kinds of myths and legends try to relate the ethnic origin of the Saho and their culture to the historical cultural centers of the ancient Middle East.

The third version suggests an affiliation with the northern Afar, in particular with the well-known tribe of Dahim-Meela (Adoi-Mara-Afar). This largest and oldest tribe of the area dominated the trade caravan route to the Tigray Kingdoms. According to my informant, Ato Tesfa-Mariam from the clan of Labha-des-‘Are, the people of Dabri-Meela believe to be descendants of the Dahim-Meela Afar tribe who came to the Saho area eight to ten generations before the Turks arrived at the coast in the 16th century. The Dahim-Meela had good commercial and political relations with the powers of Tigray at that time (see Trimingham 1976 [1952]: 171). It is probable that the Dahim-Meela penetrated the Dabri-Meela territory in order to secure the caravan trade route to Tigray and later mixed with the local Saho groups, which gave rise to the Dabri-Meela tribe. My informant also affirms that according to legend Sultan Ismail, a Turkish merchant who came to the area in the late 16th century, settled among the already existing Dabri-Meela tribe. He got married and established his own clan known as ‘Sen‘afe’.

However, the myths and legends of the Labha-des-‘Are in particular and of the Dabri-Meela in general do little to confirm the first two versions. Most of the

Dabri-Meela clans agree with the third version, particularly the Labha-des-‘Are. Even the Dabri-Meela’s Saho dialect is similar to that of the Hazo and the Afar dialect, and they admit their affiliation and intermarriage with the Hazo and Afar clans in the border area between Eritrea and Tigray. It is also confirmed that the Ghadida (*Qadi*) clans in the Zula area at the Red Sea coast are of Dabri-Meela origin; they are bi-lingual and speak both Tigre and Saho. It is also said that they migrated to the Red Sea area from the highland during the 15th century to avoid the Christian slaughters. My informant Tesfa-Mariam affirms that the Dabri-Meela changed their faith several times in order to secure and to defend their rights to the land and other interests amidst pressures of the Christian and Muslim neighboring communities, respectively. Therefore, it is difficult to trace the origins of the Dabri-Meela and the Labha-des-‘Are sub-tribe independently without taking into consideration historical and religious developments. The Saho living in this territory, both Christians and Muslims, used to live peacefully together. For example, the Labha-des-‘Are as well as Ga‘aso Christians (called Asai-Ismael) are still living together with their Muslim Saho relatives in the same villages and *endas*. They celebrate the Christian and Muslim ceremonies together and their traditional leaders have mediated family and land conflicts successfully.

7. The Irob are the Christian section of the Saho speaking people, living on the eastern escarpment of the Agame region in north-eastern Tigray, some 50 km to the east of Adi-Grat. Some of them inhabit the cross-border land between Eritrea and Ethiopia around Alitena and Zalambessa, and they settle in the Akelle Guzay region of Eritrea around Shemizana, south of the Dabra Mountain and the river Endeli. They migrate on the plateau as far as Debre-Damo. The Irob are divided into three sub-tribes, namely Adgada-‘Are, Buknayto-‘Are and Hassaballa-‘Are and are a bi-lingual community, as most of them speak Saho and Tigrinya (Gilkes 2004: 238-242). Similar to other Saho tribes, there are different versions concerning their origin. In the **first version**, according to the Irob scholar Tsegay Berhe,

the Irob tradition tells that their ancestors came from the Kelta-Awlalo district of Seraie. The place name Seraie is found both in the Irob country and in the Southern Region of Eritrea (the previous *awraja* Seraie). Thus, according to their oral history, the Irob moved to the south from Hamassien and Akelle Guzay to Agame. This migration took probably place between the 12th and the 13th centuries, a period noted for major dynastic changes in the highland of Ethiopia that caused the displacement of different ethnic groups. Accordingly, the Irob adjusted themselves to their new environment and gradually adopted the language and culture of the Tigrayans among whom they lived. They went through a process of transformation from a nomadic way of life to sedentary agriculture and, more significantly, most of the Irob nowadays practice the Tigrinya cultivation system (Tsegay Berhe 2003: 8-9). For these reasons, some Irob strongly deny their affiliation with the Saho as an ethnic group, while other Irob affirm the historical and social relationships between Irob and Saho and their intermarriage throughout generations. The Irob used to intermarry particularly with Christian Saho groups living in Eritrea, such as the Hazo and Dabri-Meela who live around Alitena and Zalambessa. The **second version** claims a European origin: some of their oral traditions tell that they come from Adulis and are descendants of Greek ship-builders who intermingled with the local Saho population and gave rise to the Irob tribe. According to Voigt, the Irob identify with the Solomonic Dynasty as most Tigrinya speaking groups do, which is an indication of their attachment to the old Christian mythology. According to the **third version**, the term ‘Irob’ can be traced back to the city of Rome: it is said to be drawn from Andarias, the son of a Roman king and of Helena, daughter of Solomon. But more probably the name is derived from the Afar-Saho word ‘orob’ (‘welcome’) (Voigt 2007: 187-188; Hayward 1991: 163-164; Trimingham 1976 [1952]: 179; Lewis 1969: 175).

The belief that the Irob and the Dabri-Meela are of Afar origin seems reasonable, because the latter dominated the caravan trade with the Abyssinians before the Sa-

ho tribes got involved in securing the roads between the coast and Tigray. Probably, the Afar who settled down in this area shifted their identity towards the Saho. The Dabri-Meela equally claim that their founding father originates from Zula/Adulis. Hence, both tribes narrate similar stories concerning their origin. Some Irob sub-tribes have undergone a conversion to Roman Catholicism, while others adhere to the Orthodox faith. Those who are Orthodox mainly live in the vicinity of the Gunda Gundo monastery, which they proudly consider to be their cultural center. For this reason, they strongly distance themselves from the Muslim Saho groups²⁵.

8. The Idda are one of the oldest Saho-speaking groups in Eritrea, as most oral traditions of the Saho affirm. A widely shared belief among all Saho tribes and sub-tribes is that the Idda are 'the guardians of the Saho land' (*badho 'ambalish*) or (*badho sogos*). Massawa and Ghinda are their traditional geographical locations, but some Idda clans also live among other ethnic groups. Due to the expansion of the Abyssinian kingdoms starting from the 12th century, they merged with Tigrinya groups in Akelle Guzay and Hamassien and with Tigre groups living in Barka, Semhar and Sahel. Even today, the oral traditions of some Tigrinya and Tigre-speaking groups indicate that they are descendants of Idda tribes, for instance in the village of Mai-Edaga (Decemhare sub-zone) and in Koatit. Some Jabarti families living in Mendefera claim that their grand grandfather was an Idda man. Similarly, some Tigre clans living in Barka (Ad-Hassano) and Semhar (Ad-Tsewai) assert to be descendants of Idda sub-tribes. During the Italian colonial period, the Idda were affiliated with the Asaorta administration and they had their own chief, *Shum* Mohammed. Concerning their origin, there are different versions: The **first one** claims they are of Arabian origin. According to Osman Abubaker, the name Idda is said to be a corruption of the Arabic word 'Jeddah'. When they were asked where they come from, they insisted that they originated from Jeddah

²⁵ Written communication with Wolbert Smidt, February 2012.

(1994: 221). However, this version is less popular among the Idda groups today and it is misleading, because Osman Abubaker tries to link all Saho tribes and sub-tribes back to Arabia in order to affiliate them with Middle Eastern history, as most Eritrean Muslims do. This attitude is shared by some Saho leaders who want to demonstrate their superiority by connecting their origin to the religious and cultural centers of the Middle East.

Pollera presents the **second version** of their origin and identifies an important fact in the history of the Idda tribes by tracing their ancestry back to Aghne, the founding father of the Idda and Tigrinya groups of Akelle Guzay. He writes that the three Christian *endas* Dekki-Ghebre, Ad-Mecom, Egghela-Hamas and the Muslim tribe of the Idda are said to be descendants of the same ancestor Aghne who is supposed to be the son of *Atse* Amdetsion, who ruled Ethiopia from 1314 to 1344. Other sources indicate that *Atse* Aghne was abducted from the Habab as a child and was raised at the court of *Atse* Becafa who ruled in Gondar from 1720 to 1730. Legend claims that Aghne found a maiden tied to a tree, where she had been left as an offering to a serpent which terrorized the area. He killed the serpent, freed the maiden and liberated the village of her tribe from subjection. She belonged to the Robra and Egghela-Hazin tribes and her father rewarded her savior by giving him his daughter as a wife and by assigning a part of the tribe's territory to him. His wife gave Aghne four sons:

1. Teheshenna, founding father of the Arato
2. Shime Mere, founder of the Dekki Ad-Mecom
3. Hanneso, founder of the Egghela-Hamas
4. Seleba, founder of the village Khorbaria

Later, Aghne emigrated to Diot (Dhi'ot) and married Chidia Wotel, a Muslim woman of the ancient Kabota Saho tribe and thus gave rise to the Idda tribe (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 79-80). This historiography makes clear that according to legend, the ancestor of the Idda is also the ancestor of the Tigrinya *endas* Dekki Ad-Mecom, Egghela-Hamas, and the *endas* of Khorbaria. Still, the Idda as Muslim clans were denied landownership rights (*rist*), unlike their Tigrinya brothers. However, the Idda oral tradition does not agree with Pollera's interpretation and presents a quite different **third version** by narrating that the Idda and Kabota were the most ancient Saho tribes in the *kebessa* region. The Idda married from the Kabota and later destroyed the Kabota in a war and became the dominant tribe in the region; they extended their power and gave rise to a number of clans who later converted to Christianity and adopted the Tigrinya language and culture, due to the Abyssinian invasions and pressures of the 12th century. Those Idda who remained Muslim were displaced from the highlands and settled in the area around Ghinda.

9. The Iddefer are one of the well-known Saho tribes in the Northern Red Sea Region. They are agro-pastoralists and migrate from Agambussa up to the mountains of Hamassien in search of pasture. They live scattered in the plains of Afta, Zula, Fatar, and 'Ala; their traditional center is Gadam and they are divided into three sub-tribes. According to Pollera (1996 [1935]: 80), Iddefer groups could be traced in the regions Akelle Guzay, Semhar, Hamassien and Barka. They are divided into various extended family groups, namely Bet Alula, Bet Raqi, Bet Yahia, Bet Omar Ali, Bet Suleiman, and Bet Danya. The Bet Danya is considered the oldest branch of the tribe and acts as the head of all Iddefer extended family groups. The origin of the Iddefer remains controversial and unclear, but there are three important versions of their history. According to the **first version**, some of the Iddefer claim to be from the same ancestor as the Bet Tawakel and Bet Khalifa

sub-tribes, all of whom are known today as lowland Asaorta. The **second version** states that the Iddefer are of Afar origin and migrated to their present habitat after long conflicts and tensions between different Afar tribes. There was a conflict between one of the most ancient tribes known as Dankali and the famous Ankala clans in the Afar region. The legend tells that after a long period of fighting between the two groups, some Dankali moved to the north and gave birth to a new Saho tribe known as Iddefer. The **third version**, according to Saho tradition and tales, claims that Iddefer is one of the oldest Saho tribes and had been a branch of the Idda before they mixed with Tigre-speaking groups in the Semhar region. This option is mentioned by Pollera as well, who writes that the Iddefer have developed in a similar way as the Idda, while their name is obviously derived from Idda-Fere (sons of Idda), and he suggests that they originated from the Idda. According to him, men from the Idda married with other elements, such as Bet-Danya (Saho origin), Bet Said Hamedu (Below origin), Bet Ankala (Afar origin), and Bet Dimbagog (Saho origin); the latter is one of the seven Saho Holy Families who spread Islam among the different Saho tribes (Pollera 1996 [1935]: 161). Eventually, this intermarriage gave birth to a new tribe known as Iddefer.

The myths and legends of the Iddefer themselves do little to confirm hypotheses linking them to the Afar tribes. They often describe their affiliation with the Idda tribe and acknowledge their inter-marriage with them before they split into different clans. As most oral Saho traditions tell, the Iddefer as well as the Bet Tawakal and Khalifa tribes are of the same origin and were among the most ancient inhabitants of the Semhar area who settled there before the invasion of the Below-Beja tribes during the 5th century. It is also recognized by the Saho elders that they are affiliated and mixed with the Semhar Tigre-speaking families. The Tawakal and Khalifa became Tigre-speaking groups while keeping their knowledge of the Saho language, and their centers are Afta and Zula at the Red Sea coast. Even today,

some Tigre clans as well as some Tigrinya-speaking groups in the highland claim to be descendants of the Iddefer tribe.

The Iddefer are bi-lingual and speak both Saho and Tigre. During the 19th century, the Semhar region faced a number of inter-ethnic conflicts and tensions concerning land, pasture and water resources, and the Egyptian administration tried to settle these conflicts and to bring the region under its civil administration. This is why they selected traditional leaders of each group who were responsible in front of the civil administration to mediate and resolve their disputes. One of the most famous representatives of the Iddefer tribe during the Egyptian administration was known as *Shum (Redanto) Hummad Ali Danya*. After his death in 1905, his son *Shum Ali Humed Ali Danya* replaced him. Another famous leader of the Iddefer was *Sheikh Hajji Osman Alula*, who was an active member of the Muslim League and fought for the independence of Eritrea (Osman Abubaker 1994: 331). During the Italian colonization and the British Military Administration, the Iddefer were administered by *Nasser Bey*. Due to the environmental conditions, the Iddefer lived together with Asaorta clans as well as with tribes related to them by inter-marriage, such as Bet Tawakel and Bet Khalifa, and they organized themselves as solidarity groups in order to get access to pasture, water resources and other scarce resources in the Semhar region.

10. Hassabat-‘Are: Like the Idda, they are a small independent tribe and are divided into five lineages that have their own chiefs. They live near Qohaito in the Akelle Guzay region and their tribal center is Karibossa. There are two versions concerning their origin: according to the **first** one, the Hassabat-‘Are are of Jewish origin and their ancestors migrated to the Eritrean coast from South Arabia. The **second** version claims that they are from the biblical Israel. The first version is more likely to be accurate, because the old Hassabat-‘Are people still narrate about their relations with Yemen. They were tough warriors and their center Kari-

bossa turned into a battlefield when they fought together with other Saho clans against the Abyssinian invasions of the 19th century. Until today, elders recite many poems which demonstrate the braveness of this tribe. Previously, they were affiliated with the Asaorta tribe under the leadership of *Nasser Bey*, but between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, they withdrew their affiliation and have since lived as an independent tribe with their own traditional leaders.