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Didier Morin

‘Asaurta

TERRITORY

The ‘Asaurtá¹ are part of the Sahos (*Sāhō*), a linguistic group of Eritrea. ‘Asaurta, as a dialect, is spoken mainly from Mount Gadam, South of Arkiko, to the South of Zula (Zola), and from this point on the coast to the North-East of ‘Addi Qäyyəḥ encompassing *wadi* Ḥaddas and *wadi* Naba Gade. Ḥalay, Mount Falum are found in the ‘Asaurta territory. Some ‘Asaurtas are also found on the island of Dasi². The ‘Asaurta area globally located between the Ṭaruu‘á dialect, the other Northern dialect of Saho, and the Ḍasamó dialect, part of the Saho Mina.

NOMENCLATURE

The first mention of the Saho language is found in Salt (1814), followed by Antoine d’Abbadie (1843), Reinisch (1877, 1878, 1889–90), Welmers (1952). As far as ‘Asaurta is concerned³, Conti Rossini (1913) was the first to provide a long grammatical description, after Capomazza’s lexicon (1910–11). More recently, Morin (1994, 1995, 1999) has published comparative data in order to reduce the different spoken varieties of Saho to two dialects, i. e. North (Ṭaruu‘á and ‘Asaurtá) and South (Ḥádo, Irob), the “Central” Mina sharing its lexicon and its grammar with either the Northern or Southern dialect. The linguistic criteria tend to free from the traditional clan classification. This is the case for the ‘Asaurta who affirm that they don’t speak Saho (*Sahot wáni*), but ‘Asaurta (*Asaurtat züdo*)⁴. In the last twenty years, along with Arabic, the ‘Asaurtas have become Tigre or Tigrinya-speakers according to their geographical location or to their enrolment in the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front, a political movement which promoted Tigrinya (and not Arabic) as the medium of the national resistance.

The ‘Asaurta divide themselves between “Asaurta of the mountain” (*agani* ‘Asaurta) and “Asaurta of the plain” (*gubi* ‘Asaurta). They share the same war-cry: *Gabaarit baḍi!* As an agro-pastoralist society, the ‘Asaurta migrate in search of rain. In winter, they move toward the coast (*dada*) with their stock when during the hot season they go up the hills (*furus*) where they plant maize and other staple food. The geographical division has its counterpart in terms of social hierarchy which appears in the following traditional tribal classification:

1. *Agani* ‘Asaurta:
 - A. The “five houses” (*Koona-‘Are*):
 - a. Ḥiya Ganfále (the elders);
 - b. Soksóle (Leeliš ‘Are, ‘Asa-Káre, ‘Asa-Leesan, Faqi-Dík);
 - c. Geytóle (Foqrotta-‘Are);
 - d. Seehóle;
 - e. Ḥasbále.
 - B. More recent groups living with the *Koona-‘Are* (‘Ingaagit or Sarma-‘Are).
 - C. Other groups considered as of inferior stock: Iddefer (*Idda-fire), Ḥaḡḡ-Abkur, Baraddotta, ‘Asa-Seeke, Ḥasabat-‘Are, Reza-Mara). The sub-grouping of the

¹ ‘Asaurtá must be preferred to “classical” orthographies *Asaorta*, *Assaorta*.

² The distribution as indicated does not take into account the consequences of the long Eritrean conflict, and the displacement of Sahos, as far as Sudan. E. g. ‘Asaurtas are found in Kassala. Two recent maps of the Saho linguistic distribution can be found in Morin 1995 and 1999.

³ Saho general and comparative linguistics (Hayward, Lamberti, Lottner etc.) are not mentioned.

⁴ *Ziḍo* (spelled also *zirho*) is a synonym for *wa(a)ni*, but here with the nuance of a “separated language”.



Fig. 1. 'Asaurta girls on Qohayto (photo: MBA 228.17).

Fogrotta-'Are with the Leeliš-'Are, the 'Asa-Kare, the 'Asa-Leesan and the Faqi-Dik may be in relation with the decreasing number of the Ḥiya Ganfále⁵.

2. Gubi 'Asaurta (located on the coast around Zola). Qadiida, Bet-Kalifa, 'Ad-'Askar, Bet-Balaw, Iddefer, Tawakkalto.

Since the best grazing lands are found on the hill, on the "Saho mountain" (*Saabót ḥangúl*), the *agani* 'Asaurta have been in better economic position and gained prestige. At the beginning of the Italian colonization, the Leeliš-'Are were already the prominent clan, while the Faqi-Dik (Bet-Faқи) provided the Islamic *cadi* for the 'Asaurtas. In fact, a more complex political equilibrium had to ensure the seasonal move toward the sea, as a poet puts it:

*dadānih iyyi ni
dadīšoo*

When we go the sea,
who will protect us?

*furusini iyyi ni
fursuusoo*

When we climb the
hill, who will protect
us?

*teleyye šum 'Ali hin
kišoo*⁶

Since *šum* Ali's death
the tribe is weak

For this reason, the 'Asaurta, and the Sahos as a whole, experimented a kind of local democ-

⁵ Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad (*Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* I: 362) writes *kunaare*, and enumerates: Fogrotta-Are, Leliš-Are, Assakare, Assalisan and Fakiḥ-Are after Nadel (1994:127) and Trimmingham (*kawn 'Are*, 1976: 177). The subdivisions and orthography indicated above are the result of direct field-works.

Fig. 2. 'Asaurta girls on Qohayto (photo: MBA 228.18).



racy, through which prominent clans up the hill had to compromise with lowlanders.

HISTORY AND COLONIAL PERIOD

The earliest reference to the 'Asaurta (also to the Ḥādo and the Ṭaruu'á) could be in a British Museum MS. dated A.D. 1455–56. They might have been Christians under Zār'a Ya'āqob⁷. Their conversion to Islam occurred in the following centuries. In the 19th century, it seems that the Mirghaniyya first established in the Sudan played a decisive role in the complete islamization of the 'Asaurta. A more ancient religious influx is also attested by the existence of the so-called *Malhina Mīmbara*, a group of 'Afar and Saho lineages which claim to be from the descent of

seven Yamani *shaykh* (Morin 2004: 222). A legend (Pollera 1935: 266; Abdulkader Saleh Mohamad) derives the name 'Asaurta from an eponymous Arab immigrant, 'Umar as-Sawr (ar. *ṭawr* "bull"), but one cannot exclude a link with 'asa *awur* "red bull", in connection with the pagan rite in Mount Falum where a white cow was sacrificed each year (Reinisch 1890: 132).

According to the 1931 Italian Census (Pollera 1935), the 'Asaurta numbered 22,207, i. e. 58.4% out of a total of 38,000 Sahos. Adding the Ṭaruu'á (2,550), the Northern dialect speakers

⁶ Morin (1999: 88). *Šum* 'Ali is Nuuri 'Ali, chief of the 'Asa-Leesan, before the battle of Ḥalat.

⁷ Trimmingham (1965: 177, n. 4).

represent 65% of the total Saho-speakers. A more recent survey (1996) indicates a global figure of 160.000 Sahos⁸, without indicating the internal dialectal breakdown. There is no reason to think that it changes the percentages given by the 1931 census. The written norm developed by the Eritrean administration mainly based on Northern Saho Ṭaruu'á is a confirmation of the Northern Saho dialect prevalence⁹.

The necessary solidarity between highlanders and lowlanders, in order to ensure the seasonal migration and to protect from San'adagle raids, a Christian Tigrinya-speaking population living to the North of the 'Asaurta territory, developed a strong feeling of independence which appears in the following extract:

'Asaurta labha kii tine	The 'Asaurta were warriors
'Asaurta ardee koo ugutaanah	The 'Asaurta used to leave their country
Sarae azmitii yinin	They used to loot the Serae
Kohayn azmitii yinin	They used to loot the Kohayn
Nugus ten arde oobak mi yiné	The King [of Ethio- pia] never dared to enter their land
Nugusub gibre ahay mi yiniini	They never paid any tax to him

Achille Raffray, a French civil servant who travelled into the Saho country, confirms this point when he writes in March 1874:

"The Shoho and the surrounding countries were nominally under the Negus rule, and they pay rarely the tax. It is the case when the King [of Ethiopia] sends enough troops to collect it. They don't have any chief, even chosen by themselves. (...) Among them, equality is complete. The most revered men according to their age or wisdom join together and deliberate on the public affairs with the rest of the population. (...) It happened that the King tried to impose them chiefs, but they were promptly assassinated".

It seems that the 'Asaurta began to pay tribute after 1875, when *ras* Alula became governor of the Maräb Mällaš. Due to their strategic position, they became more and more involved in the colonial struggle. If one may assume that many of them resist to the European intrusion, there are also evidences that the picture has been

more balanced. One can oppose the support given by the Leeliš-'Are to *ras* Alula, to whom they provide scouts before the battle of Dogali (January 26, 1887), and the treaty signed with the Italians (May 9, 1887) by Aḥmad (or Ḥasan) 'Osman. Also, in 1888, by asking for Italian protection the *gubi* 'Asaurtas of Zola (Kaliifa, Qaadiida, Šek-Maḥammud, Tawwakalto) thus gained their emancipation from the *naa'ib* of Arkiko. At the battle of Halat (1891), the *banda* 'Asaurta under cap. Pinelli stopped the raid toward Boori conducted by *ras* Sebḥat, of 'Agame¹⁰. Conti Rossini himself (1913: 151) indicates that his informants were 'Asa-Leesan soldiers of the Eritrean Third Battalion. The support given to the colonial power may also explain why "Assaorta" became a synonym for Saho. Since Italy strongly support the development of Arabic and Islam in Eritrea, the habit of adding the noun *bet* (Arabic *bayt*) to the name of Arab-speaking groups, such as the Bet Kaliifa, instead of Kaliifa-d-*dik*¹¹ appears as a post-colonial heritage.

LINGUISTICS

'Asaurta and Ṭaruu'á are the two varieties of the Northern dialect of Saho. Interestingly, one can observe that some differences inside the Northern dialect as between the two dialects (North and South) of Saho have their counterpart in 'Afar, establishing in synchrony as historically the existence of an 'Afar-Saho continuum (Morin 1995). Example: "neighbour": 'Afar *huggáytu*, Southern Saho and 'Asaurta *huggáyto*, Northern Saho (Ṭaruu'á) *huggátto*. 'Afar and Saho Ḥado *bodó* "hole", Saho Ṭaruu'á *hudúm*, 'Asaurta *bozo*. Mahaffy was the first to describe 'Afar as a "dialectal chain", an observation which can be extended to Saho. One will compare also:

⁸ Curriculum Branch, Department of Primary Education, Asmara, 1996.

⁹ See Vergari 2003.

¹⁰ *Boll. Soc. Afric. d'Italia* (1891: 55), Sabelli (I: 7-21). Oral text in Morin (1999: 85-89).

¹¹ In Saho, 'áre (or *dik* or *harak*) "house" as the *bayt* in Ancient Yaman, means both the lineage and the land (Beeston 1972: 256). In 'Afar, 'ári means only "the house" in its materiality. As a permanent settlement, traditional Saho *dik* is similar to 'Afar *gub* "enclosure". Modern *dik* (Vergari: 70) means "village", "place of birth", "country", "nation". The "traditional" i. e. peasant house is called *naḥsa* (and not *dik*).

	„ear”	„fish”	„head”
‘Afar	<i>aytí</i>	<i>kúllum</i>	<i>amó</i>
Saho Ḥado	<i>aytí</i>	<i>kúllum</i>	<i>amó</i>
Saho Ṭaruu‘á	<i>‘okká</i>	<i>‘aasá</i>	<i>laaná</i>
Saho Ṭaruu‘á			
Moosata-‘Are	<i>aytí</i>	<i>‘aasá</i>	<i>laaná</i>
Saho ‘Asaurta			
‘Asa-Leesan	<i>aytí</i>	<i>kúllum</i>	<i>amó</i>

These correspondences are also found in morphology:

Saho-‘Asa-Leesan	<i>‘ar-aafa-lle</i>	<i>yoh</i>	<i>sug</i>
Ṭaruu‘á	<i>méel-aafa-lle</i>	<i>yo</i>	<i>‘ambal</i>
T. Moosata-‘Are	<i>méel-aafa-lle</i>	<i>yo</i>	<i>‘imbal</i>
Mina	<i>méel-aafa-lle</i>	<i>yoh</i>	<i>sug</i>
Ḥado / Mina	<i>dig-t-aafa-lle</i>	<i>yoh</i>	<i>sug</i>
Ḥado	<i>‘ar-aafa-l</i>	<i>yi</i>	<i>ilal</i>
‘Afar			
(North & South)	<i>‘ar-aafa-l</i>	<i>yoo</i>	<i>‘ambal</i>
	house-entrance-at	me-for	wait
	“Wait for me at the house door”		

In these examples, the relevant opposition is between Saho postposition *-lle* and Afar *-l*. But the picture is again complicated by the fact that in certain context, Southern Saho (Ḥado) uses *-l* as Afar does:

‘Afar	<i>áwka</i>	<i>yi-düdon-ul</i>	<i>hay</i>
Southern Saho	<i>inḍáwka</i>	<i>yi-‘aadá-l</i>	<i>baa</i>
Northern Saho	<i>inḍóoka</i>	<i>yi-düdol-ulle</i>	<i>baa</i>
	baby	my-back-on	put
	“Put the baby on my back” (said by a woman)		

One has also to take into account code-switching among migrants or speakers mixing dialects. This might explain verbal forms as *yani* (Conti Rossini 1904) instead of common Saho *yané* “he is”, also: **lutuk tine*, **linoki nine*, instead of pan-Saho (and not restricted to the ‘Asa-Lesan), *lituk tine*, *linok nine* (Conti Rossini 1904: 167).

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