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Fesseha Berhe

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*Invisible Diversity: Exploring the Historical Dynamics of the
Saho Muslim Settlements in Təgray*

Fesseha Berhe*

The classical academic literature generally defines the Saho populations as a non-homogenous ‘ethno-linguistic’ group, found mainly in Eritrea but also in some parts of Təgray (Ethiopia), and the Sudan. Though the use of the Saho language is almost always considered as their major identity marker, these populations are often associated with the ‘Afar communities, with whom they would share the same geographical origins in the eastern lowlands, and transhumant animal herding tradition.’¹

However, few studies moderate these classical clichés on the Saho ‘ethno-linguistic’ groups, by revealing the diversity of their geographical origins, and their ancient symbiotic relations with the representatives of the Təgrīñña speaking Christian highland communities, throughout the regional history.² Nevertheless, these studies have still been unable to clearly explain the historical process that led to the geographical dissemination of the Saho populations, along the two sides of the Ethio-Eritrean borders. Besides, it is still commonly assumed that the Saho settlements in Təgray is limited to the Irob of north east Təgray.³ Last but not the least, the Saho seem to be more and more considered as ‘wanderers’ and ‘foreigners’ in some parts of the present Təgray Region. To fill this academic gap, this article proposes to explore the historical trajectories of the different Saho Muslim groups, in the present Təgray Regional State.⁴

* Assistant Professor at the Department of History and Heritage Management, Mekelle University; email: fesschab.mu@gmail.com

¹ See LEWIS 1969, NADEL 1944, POLLERA 1935, TRIMINGHAM 1965, ULLENDORFF 1973. The *Irob* groups, despite the fact that they speak Saho language, do not consider themselves as Saho (TESFAY MEDHIN, 1993 E.C, TSEGAY BERHE 2006, VOIGT 2007, ZIGTA Berhe 2000 E.C.).

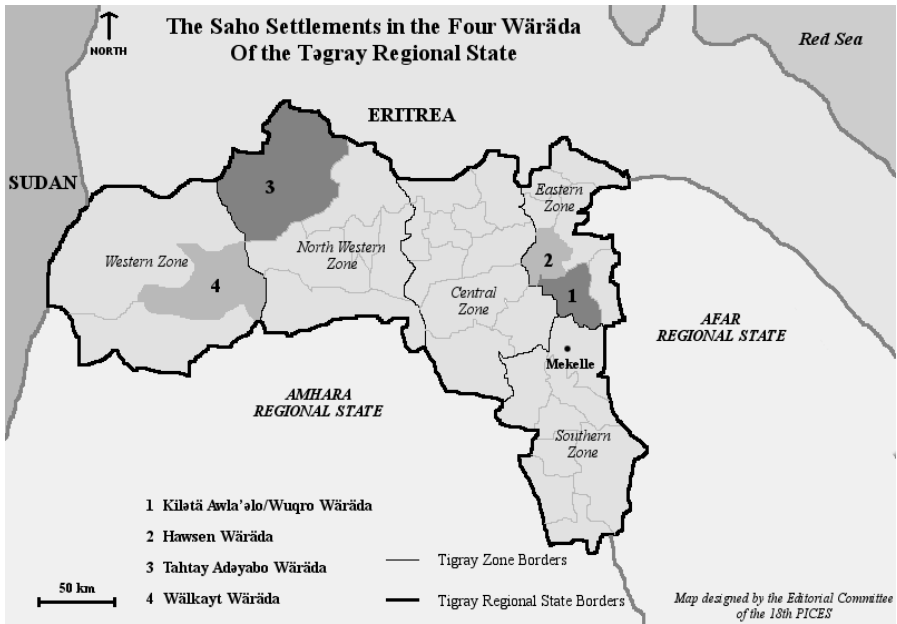
² See BRUCE 1790; WILKINS 1870; PARKYNS 1868; DE COSSON 1877; GABRA IYASUS 1954 E.C. However, GASCON (2003) states that there were land-use feuds between the Saho and Təgrīñña speaking Christians in Akkälä Guzay area.

³ Even recent works such as HUDSON 2012, SMIDT 2010, VOIGT 2007 confine the Saho in Təgray to the Irob people only. While others such as ABDULKADER SALEH 2009, 2013, ABDULKADER SALEH and MORIN D. 2010, BANTI and VERGARI 2010a, BANTI and VERGARI 2010b include the Ḥazo, Minifāṛā and the Irob but they still geographical limit the Saho in Təgray to the ‘Agamā area only.

⁴ This paper has benefited from a survey research entitled “Exploring Islamic Heritages in Təgray: The case of Eastern and Southern Zones of Təgray” carried out between April and September 2011, which was generously funded by Mekelle University. The author expresses its sincere gratitude to the University for

Contrary to the static and mainly functionalist approaches privileged in most of these studies on the Saho populations, this work mobilizes more diachronic perspectives.

Through the collection of local – and mostly oral – historical narratives, this study explores the historical dynamics of the several Saho Muslim settlements, in the different zones of present Təgray. This study shows that the existence of the Saho in Təgray is far wide and significant contrary to what was previously thought. Besides the Irob (relatively well studied and thus well known Saho group), there are Saho Muslim communities in various localities in Təgray stretching over four zones and twelve districts of the region⁵. From the reign of Iyasu II, the reign of Yoḥannəs IV, to the Italian occupation and the current federal regime, this exploration of the local trajectories of these Saho groups provides another historical reading of the centre/periphery dichotomy, in the southern vicinity of the controversial Ethio-Eritrean border.



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⁵ Of the six zones in the Regional National State of Təgray, the Southern and South-Eastern Zones are the only Zones where we do not find the Saho.

Muslim descent, caravan trade networks and local representatives of the Christian kingdom: The Saho settlements of the Eastern Təgray Zone

The Saho settlements established in the Eastern zone seem to perform the long history of the Muslim caravan networks that used to link the banks of the Red Sea to the highlands of Təgray and beyond in addition to their agro-pastoral economic activities.

Šäk Bäkeri and the Hidaros in the qušät of Mätəkäl ʿƏlama

The *qušät*⁶ of Mätəkäl ʿƏlama is part of the Wuqro – or today rather called Kilətä Awlaʿlo – district (*wäräda*), in the Eastern Zone of the present Təgray Regional State. An ancient trade route used to cross this plain district, close to the Afar lowlands. In addition, Mätəkäl ʿƏlama is located near the senior Nägaš Mosque in this district, where the Companions of Prophet Mohammad settled in the 7th century, after fleeing from Mecca-Medina. The local historical narratives on the numerous Saho Muslim communities, inhabiting the *qušät* of Mätəkäl ʿƏlama associate themselves with those living in Atsəbi-Wonbärta *wäräda* who suggest that they could be one of the oldest Saho groups established in Təgray.⁷

The local memories on these Saho Muslim groups often legitimate their presence in Mätəkäl ʿƏlama by connecting its history with a certain *Šäk* Bäkri. According to the local narratives, this *Šäk* obtained the control of this territory – through a *gult* concession – to reward him and his people, from the assistance he provided to an important notable, who was probably the royal ruler (*Šum*) of Şəraʿə, Täklä Mikaʿel. In addition, as his *gult* permitted to his relatives and religious companions to legally settle in Mätəkäl ʿƏlama, *Šäk* Bäkri would have to facilitate the coming of the Hidaros populations on this eastern territory of the Eastern Təgray Zone. Eight or nine generations ago, during the time of *Šum* Şəraʿə Täklä Mikaʿel,⁸ the oral tradition argues that the *Šäk* asked the Hidaros living in the neighbouring Dägabur, Wonbärta territories to bestow him a reliable man who would assist him in establishing his *gult* in Mätəkäl ʿƏlama. Pleased by this proposal, the Hidaros sent a certain *Šum* Muḥammad, whose daughter (Asəgädu) – a Hidaros from Wonbärta – married *Šum* Ara ʿAli, a Jäbärti and son of *Šäk* Bäkri.

However, the local historical narratives still perform the matrimonial alliances binding together the descendants of *Šäk* Bäkri and the Hidaros of Wonbärta. The Hidaros,⁹ who speak Saho language, live in different districts of eastern Təgray. The name ‘Hidaros’, according to my informants, was given to this group eight-nine generations ago during the time of *Šum* Şəraʿə Təkälä Mikaʿel. According to their local accounts, drought had forced their ancestors to migrate to Wonbärta by abandoning their original settlements in the vicinity of Sänʿafä in today’s Eritrea. They asked *Šum* Şəraʿə Təkälä Mikaʿel to allow them to settle in the area. The term ‘Hidaros’ is often related to the

⁶ It is like a parish or ‘village’ and it is not part of the official government/administrative structure.

⁷ See FESSEHA GIORGIS 1993 E.C.

⁸ According to some oral sources he was in a position sometime during the reign of *Aşé* Iyasu II (r.1730-1755).

⁹ Was Munzinger referring to this group in the description of the ‘Doga’ people in his 1869 narrative?

decision of *Šum Šəra’ə Tāklā Mika’el* to warn the ‘Afar – and the other groups living in the adjacent territories – not to ‘touch’ the new comers, whom he considered as his *ḥidri*, meaning ‘guests’ in Təgrīñña. Thanks to the protection of the *Šum*, these Ḥidarō populations of Dāgabur spread across the districts of Wonbārta, Dāsə’a, Gār’alta and Šəra’ə including Mātəkāl ’Īlama.

Until the 1974 Socialist Revolution, the *gult* of *Šək Bākri* in Mātəkāl ’Īlama provided his descendants with the exclusive right to use these lands of Mātəkāl ’Īlama. Though they remain Muslim and well-known for their involvement in the *Arbo* salt trade, the Ḥidarō found in Mātəkāl ’Īlama are today mostly based on sedentary farming production. Since the last few decades migration particularly irregular migration to the Middle East seems one of the copying strategies that these people have been applying.¹⁰ Whereas the number of Christian households is still very limited in this *qušāt* of the eastern Təgray zone, their cultural influence seems to keep growing.

The Sabo Agro-Pastoralist Federations of Ḥawəzen

Beyond the north-western boundaries of Wuqro/Kilətä Awla’əlo, other Saho communities inhabit the densely populated highlands of the Ḥawəzen *wäräda*. Though the oral tradition does not clearly report when these Saho first settled in this ancient political centre of Təgray, the local historical narratives argue that they arrived before the reign of *Aše Yoḥannəs IV*.¹¹ Among the different Saho groups established in the ’Īnko, Dängar, and ‘Adi Gäfah *qušāt* of Ḥawəzen, the Muslim *Ḥazo* federations¹² are presented as the founders of the first local settlements.

Like in Mātəkāl ’Īlama, the local narratives on the Saho communities of Ḥawəzen assume that they were nomadic herders. Originating from Bur¹³ (near Bada), these Muslim Saho pastoralists used to move around the northern ‘Agamä and ’Īmba Sinäyēti-Näbälät areas, in search of suitable grazing areas for their cattle. When they learned that the locale which was by then covered by forest is vacant they decided to make a permanent settlement. The local historical narratives portray the founding Ḥazo Saho federations in Ḥawəzen as courageous pioneers, establishing their permanent settlements in these forest territories, infested by malaria. With respect to their local memory, when the Saho came to that area, it was forsaken. Sometime before their arrival the former residents were wiped out as a result of malaria epidemic. Oral tradition has it that the pandemic left only one person alive. ’Īnko (the name of one of the *qušāt*), meaning ‘one’ in Təgrīñña, is associated with this tragic incident because only one of the early settlers survived this epidemic.

¹⁰ On the irregular migration in Təgray to the Middle East see FESSEHA BERHE 2013.

¹¹ During the time of *Aše Yoḥannəs IV* the Saho seem well established in the area. In the course of the discussion, all the informants tell how *Aše Yoḥannəs IV* had forced their ancestors to convert to Christianity. From this we can tentatively conclude that the Saho settled in the area some time before mid 19th century or even earlier.

¹² The sub-clans of Ḥazo who first settled in the area were: 1. ’Īronaba in ’Īnko, 2. ’Īnda ‘Umär Gayəsa in ‘Adi Gäfah, and ’Īnda ‘Assa ‘Abdälla in Dängar.

¹³ See NOSNITSIN 2003.

During the Italian occupation, the Italian administration had acknowledged land owned by the Muslims. According to the local oral tradition, it was at that time that the Saho groups started to focus on farming activities. In the three *qušät-s* of ʾĒnko, Dāngar, and ʿAdi Gäfah, the Saho settlers had to pay a tribute to the *gult* owner, a certain *Dājäč* Sahlä. Nevertheless, until the land reforms implemented by the *Derg* and the TPLF, the land in Dāngar and ʿAdi Gäfah was exclusively in the hands of the Muslim Saho. Contrary to these two other *qušät-s*, the Saho who settled in ʾĒnko were quickly confronted to the arrival of Christian Highlanders, some of them claiming *rist* rights on the area. Moreover, with the establishment of Giyorəgis church in the 1940s, one third of the land of the locality (ʾĒnko) was given to the church. All these have aggravated the territorial competition with the Christian Highlanders and reduced the size of land that the Saho previously held.

Land pioneers or foreign wanderers? The controversial status of the Saho settlements in the North-Western Zones

The Saho settlements are not limited to the eastern part of the present Təgray Regional State. The fieldworks conducted in the north-western and western zones reveal the presence of other Saho communities.

The Sabo of Šāraro in the north-western zone

In the Šāraro area of the Gərat Rāda *qušät*, within the Tahtay Adəyabo *wärāda*, the local narratives suggest that the first Saho settlers arrived there before the invasion of the country by the Italians in 1935. The Saho did not settle in the area directly from their original homeland in Eritrea. These Saho groups were nomadic herders, engaged in seasonal migrations in search of better grazing land for their herds across the eastern or central Təgray and Asəgādä Şəməbəla area prior to their settlement in Adyabo lowlands including Gərat Rāda.

Nowadays, there are twenty five Saho households (extended families) in Gərat Rāda, divided into different clans and sub-clans, the majority being the ʿAsawərta ‘clan’– which is also the common name generally ascribed on all the Saho speaking groups living in these western lowlands of Təgray.

According to the local oral tradition, the Šāraro territory was mainly covered with a dense forest, except for the areas inhabited by the Kunama, when the senior Saho groups decided to settle in the area. As in the Həwəzen *wärāda*, the Saho settlers of Šāraro were later followed by the arrival of the Christian Highlanders, coming mainly from the Naʿəder, Zana, and Čəlla districts of Təgray, as well as the today’s Eritrean plateaux of Hamasen. Though the Saho Muslim communities often decided to move to the untenanted lowlands of the current North-Western Zone, they were finally joined by the increasing number of Christian settlements. Within few decades, land competition entailed growing tensions between the Christian Highlanders and the Saho settlers.

Today, the two communities seem to co-exist in a ‘relative harmony’ – to quote one of the current inhabitants of this area. Though the Saho also speak Təgrīñña, it seems

that there is minimal interaction with the Christian settlers. The term *Şārāgo*, meaning ‘sweepers’ in the Təgrīñña language, given to the local Saho groups by the Highlanders, concretely illustrate these historical tensions mainly expressed through land competitions. Indeed, this ‘sweepers’ label expresses the aptitude of the Saho pioneers to enter and settle in uninhabited areas. The Saho of this locality are still following a semi nomadic way of life. Except during the rainy season, they often send their cattle to the Wälkayt and Təkkäzä districts, in the lowlands of the Western Təgray Zone.

The local narratives collected in Gərat Rāda indicate that the Təgrayan Highlanders often point out the allegedly strong relations of the Saho inhabiting this *qušāt* with the Italian Administration and with the Eritrean liberation movements (the Eritrean Liberation Front, ELF and the Eritrean People Liberation Front, EPLF), through their participation in the military and other campaigns waged by the Fronts between the 1960s and 1980s.¹⁴ Moreover, it is commonly argued that a large majority of the local Saho communities took part in the 1993 referendum, whose result inaugurated the secession from Ethiopia, through the recognition of the independent Eritrean State. However, the Saho tend to categorically reject these allegations. They rather claim their Ethiopian identity and continuous support for the military and political agendas of the Tigrean People Liberation Front (TPLF).¹⁵ Some informants even tell stories of the involvement of several Saho Muslims of Western Təgray in the resistance movement waged by Ethiopian patriots against the Italian invasion. Very recently, the Federal and Təgray Regional Governments have attempted to end the insistent rumours on the putative ‘Eritrean’ identity of these local Saho communities, by officially recognizing their Ethiopian citizenship – though few of them still remain ‘stateless’ in the Gərat Rāda *qušāt*.

The Sabo of Məzäga in the Western Zone

To complete this introductory overview of the different Saho settlements in the present Təgray Regional State, the approximately eighty households found in the Mugu’e *qušāt* of the Wälqayt *wäräda*, within the Western Təgray Zone, have to be mentioned here. Mugu’ə is an interesting case because it was almost uninhabited until the 1970s except for the Şälim Bət¹⁶. Established around 1997 (1990 in the Ethiopian Julian calendar), this Saho settlement is probably the latest one in all Təgray. Mugu’e is a clear illustration that the Saho are in constant move even after they entered into Təgray. My informants

¹⁴ This may have some grain of truth as many Saho left to the Bärika lowlands in Eritrea when the ELF was forced to leave the Western lowlands of Təgray in 1974 E. C.

¹⁵ Regarding the 1993 referendum on the Eritrean independence, the different Saho individuals interviewed for this study in Gərat Rāda unanimously argue that the TPLF cadres ordered them to participate and positively vote for the independence of Eritrea.

¹⁶ See HABTOM and SMIDT 2010, SMIDT 2011.

and/or their parents were in three-four different areas in Təgray before they finally settled in Mugu'e¹⁷.

As in Gərat Rāda, these communities settled in the Māzāga plain of the Mugu'e *qušāt* because of the growing coming of the Christian populations from the Təgray highlands in the North-Western Zone. But contrary to the three configurations exposed in this article, this recent Saho settlement in Mugu'e was achieved with the permission of the present local authorities. Though the Māzāga territory is also inhabited by Christian Highlanders, the local authorities largely moderate the potential land competition between the two communities, by controlling the location and the size of the lands where they successively settled¹⁸. The citizenship problem as seen in Gərat Rāda also existed to limited extent in the *qušāt* as well.

In the Mugu'e *qušāt*, all the Saho Muslim populations belong to the *Ṭorə'a* 'clan' specifically the *Bet Muse*, 'sub-clan'. However, they seem to follow the same socio-economic pattern than the other Saho populations in Təgray. Indeed, these local communities are also engaged in mixed agro-pastoral activities, and send their herds to the Tākāzzā lowlands during the dry season. In addition, the local historical narratives report that these *T'orə'a* federations used to be involved in the regional Saho networks, through the seasonal migrations of these nomadic herders, across the territories of the north-western zone.

Thus, behind the unique *Ṭorə'a* federations present in the Mugu'e *qušāt*, their current members still have relatives living in different locations of the North-Western Zone.¹⁹ Like the several groups today disseminated from the Eritrean lowlands, to the Eastern and Western Təgray Zones, the Saho of Māzāga are also connected to the other Saho communities, through Muslim legacies matrimonial alliances, descent and pastoral federations.²⁰

Conclusion

Across the Ethio-Eritrean lowlands surrounding the plateau of Təgray, this introductory study of these several Saho settlements unveils the plural social declensions of their almost unknown history. Beyond the static – and sometimes pejorative – portray, depicted through the current 'ethno-linguistic' models, the local historical narratives on

¹⁷ In the family history of one of my informants, we see continuous movement from Eritrea to Zagir ('Adi Hageray) and then from Zagir to Azho ('Adi Hageray) and finally from Azho to Mugu'e. We have five generations from the one who entered to Təgray from Eritrea and his great- great- great son who lives in Mugu'e. We find similar five-four-three generations migration story in this area.

¹⁸ One former civil servant of the Wälqayt *wärāda* told me that there were cattle raiding related conflicts between the Saho, the new comers and the Šällim Bét during the 1990s. However, this data was not confirmed through the interviews conducted elsewhere for this study.

¹⁹ Before their settlement in Mugu'e, they were living in various localities such as Mäy Hāramus, 'Elami and 'Azəho in 'Adi Hağāray, Widak in 'Adi Da'ero, Hohoye in 'Adi Nābərə'd, Gərat Rāda in Šāraro, Mäyli and May 'Ebara in Šərāro.

²⁰ Even after the border conflict, they have been communicating with their relatives in Eritrea through letters under the auspices of the ICRC. This also seems to be the case for those living in Gərat Rāda – and probably for the other Saho communities, established in the western lowlands of Təgray.

the different Saho settlements rather reveal the religious, economic and political dynamics of the centre/periphery device in past and present Təgray. The first finding of this study suggests that the Saho identity may be rooted into the long history of the Muslim caravan networks of this North-Eastern African region. In the four configurations explored in this article, the local historical memories report the presence of Saho settlers in Təgray, since the 18th century – and probably before, in the Eastern Zone of Təgray.

Along the dense forests and inhabited escarpments, linking the Afar lowlands to the Təgray plateau, the senior Saho settlements were generally established on the caravan trade routes, used by the regional pastoralists during their seasonal migrations. In the local narratives, the *Šäk*-s who founded these early settlements are portrayed as influent Saho notables, sometimes integrated into the administration of the Təgray Christian kingdom. Rewarded for their services with *gult* land privileges, these respected Muslim partners of the Christian Highlanders were the legal owners of the founding Saho territories, located in the Eastern and North-Eastern Zones of present Təgray.

The history of Saho Muslims of Təgray has been the history of migration and integration but also that of marginalization. The Saho has been courageous pioneers, establishing permanent settlements in various untenanted territories and later whereby entered into competition with later highland settlers (Təgriñña speaking Christians). There are evidences that show that some lands in Təgray were exclusively in the hands of the Saho Muslims; even in some cases the Saho were *rəsti* land owners. Contrary to this, the Saho Muslims of Təgray have been also subject of marginalization, in which in some cases even their ‘Ethiopianess’ was put in question.

However, particularly since the 1940s, this study suggests that several historical dynamics have affected the status of the Saho Muslims of Təgray. From the Italian occupation, the growing land competition, to the decline of caravan trade, the 1974 Revolution and the subsequent land reforms introduced by the Derg, the political and military activities of the ELF, EPLF, and the TPLF, the radical land reforms of the TPLF, the independence of Eritrea and the subsequent border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the resettlement programmes of the EPRDF government, tend to have great effect on the Saho federations in contemporary Təgray.

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