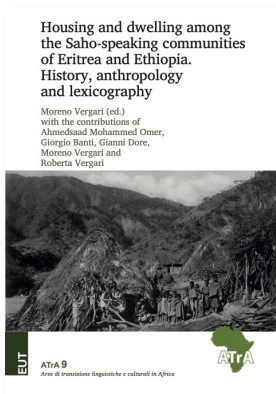


## RECENSIONI



MORENO VERGARI (ed.) with the contributions of Ahmedsaad Mohammed Omer, Giorgio Banti, Gianni Dore, Moreno Vergari and Roberta Vergari (2022). *Housing and Dwelling among the Saho-Speaking Communities of Eritrea and Ethiopia. History, Anthropology and Lexicography*. ATTrA 9. Trieste: EUT, pp. 399, ISBN 978-88-5511-374-8, e-ISBN 978-88-5511-375-5. Liberamente scaricabile a questo indirizzo: <https://www.openstarts.units.it/handle/10077/34546>

The volume under review is the result of a joint work by Ahmedsaad Mohammed Omer, Giorgio Banti, Gianni Dore, Moreno Vergari (who is also the editor) and Roberta Vergari. The book consists of two main parts, one is anthropological/historical and the second one lexicographic. Gianni Dore took care of the anthropological description part of the Saho housing and dwelling, while Moreno Vergari, Roberta Vergari and Ahmedsaad Mohammed Omer compiled the “Saho Encyclopedic Lexicon of Dwelling and Building Practices”. Giorgio Banti has a main role in the project ATMCS (Atlas of the Traditional Material Culture of the Saho) that generated the study exposed in the volume, in which he contributed with Moreno Vergari in writing the introduction. In the ATMCS project Banti is particularly active in data collection and analysis.

As stated on page 7, note \*, the research was supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the University of Naples l’Orientale, the former IsIAO, and Ilaria Micheli, the coordinator of “the FIRB project” It would have been clearer to spell out the letters of the acronym FIRB (Fondo per gli Investimenti di Ricerca di Base), that is repeated on page 8 followed by the title “Futuro in Ricerca”. It is also true that I could find the meaning of the acronym somewhere on the internet, while in all official documents it is never spelled out. Another acronym under the same note is ILCA, that is spelled out as Irob Culture and Language Association. It is not clear if there is a problem in the spelling, that should be Irob Language and Culture Association, or in the order of L and C in the acronym. In the same note, but on page 8 there is a mention with grateful acknowledgment of “the directors of the Italian Cultural Institute of Addis Ababa” not followed by the names of these directors. On page 10 of the Introduction there is a brief description of the classification of Saho and its major dialects. Considering the rich anthropological and linguistic material contained in the volume, it would have been more appreciated to have more extensive classificatory details that determined with precision the position of Saho in the context of the Cushitic language family rather than limiting to the mention of the tight relationship with ‘Afar within East Cushitic. For example, it would have been appropriated to include a genealogical tree of Cushitic that highlighted the place of Saho. As for the writing system, it is understood, still on page 10, that the Saho spoken in Eritrea is written in Latin orthography, while the Saho spoken in Ethiopia is written in “an adapted form of Ge‘ez script”. In note 4 of the same page, it is stated that other languages of Ethiopia are written in Ethiopian script, including Harari and Kunama (language almost totally spoken in Eritrea and only marginally spoken in Ethiopia). It

would have been the case at this point to remark that the tendency in the Horn of Africa is to apply an Ethiopian (fidäl)-based orthography to (Ethio-)Semitic languages and a Latin-based orthography to non-(Ethio-)Semitic languages. Kunama and Southern Saho in this sort of informal language policy are clear exceptions. It is interesting to notice that point 4 of the Introduction presents in detail all the places where the researchers have been doing fieldwork with geographical indications, including coordinates, dates and consultants' names and information about them, such as gender, age and occupation.

The final part of the Introduction, point 6., contains essential notes on the orthographies of northern (Eritrean) and southern (Ethiopian) Saho. As we stated above, there are two orthographies: the first one has been officially established by the Eritrean government in the 1990s based on the Latin script, while the second one has been introduced by the Ethiopian government in the 1970s based on the Ethiopian script. The differences between the two writing systems are not only graphic, but also in the phonemic inventory. For the consonants, this is shown in table 1, page 26, which consists of a column with IPA symbols followed by a column with the consonants in northern Saho orthography, followed by the symbols of the southern Saho orthography. It would have probably been preferable to add a chart in which the IPA symbols were placed in a grid indicating place of articulation and manner of articulation, particularly for those readers who are not familiar with the phonologies of the Horn of Africa. They might find it hard on the spot, for example, to guess what symbols such as [d], voiced apical retroflex, or [ɾ], voiced retroflex flap, stand for. Another table with a description of the articulatory characteristics of each phoneme would have also been useful. As for the vowels, there is no self-standing treatment, nor a chart that shows their positions. They are presented in the context of the representation of consonant gemination and vowel length, in a table with, again, IPA, northern Saho and southern Saho. From the table one can deduce that the vowel system of Saho consists of the five cardinal vowels i, u, e, o, a, short and long. In the final part of these linguistic notes, it is mentioned that some words are distinguished only by the position of tone. It is curious to notice the system used in the southern Saho orthography to disambiguate these minimal pairs: an apostrophe is added at the end of the word to mark that the tone falls on the penultimate and not on the last syllable. One would expect that it marked a tone falling on the last syllable, as it is closer to it. The example presented is with the words **ጫ'** [báɖa] "son" and **ጫ** [baɖá] "daughter". In Eritrean Saho, the corresponding words are *barha* "son" and *barhã* "sister", with a diaeresis on top of the high-toned syllable vowel.

As already stated, the volume consists of an anthropological/historical part and a linguistic part on Saho dwelling and related practices. The two parts are connected in the sense that the terms referring to dwelling appearing in the anthropological/historical part are also contained in the lexicon and better defined. The anthropological/historical part, contributed by Gianni Dore, is 81 pages long (51-137), while the linguistic part, an encyclopedic lexicon with comparative notes created by Ahmedsaad Mohammed Omer, Moreno Vergari and Roberta Vergari is 158 pages long (139-297). The appendix "Terminologies quoted in the lexicon from Reinisch's *Wörterbuch der Saho-Sprache* (1890)" makes parallels between the words in Reinisch's Saho dictionary and some of those found in the encyclopedic lexicon. It is 35 pages long (299-334). The final part of the volume contains a wealth of photos, but also drawings, maps and tables. In total there are 293 items. The two parts are

preceded by an extensive bibliography. The first part of the bibliography shows the references by the contributors of the volume. The second part all other references. A third part makes reference to three archives.

As already stated, Gianni Dore, of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, is the author of the anthropological/historical part of this volume on Saho dwelling. This part has no introduction as basic information and a summary are given in the introductory part of the book under "5. Contents of this volume". The same is for the encyclopedic lexicon. It is an outstandingly rich and dense description of whatever related, more or less closely, to the way the Saho dwell. One can be surprised with the wealth of detailed information that Dore was able to collect and present, information that non only refer to the present situation of Saho dwelling, mainly studied on the basis of the data collected during fieldwork periods in the context of the ATMCS project, but also to past situation, pre-colonial and colonial, reconstructed making use of invaluable, overwhelmingly Italian, historical sources. From the diachronic comparison of present and past, Dore was, therefore, able to define the development of change in Saho dwelling solutions. The first four sections, out of eleven, of Dore's account, however, do not deal strictly with Saho dwelling. They treat the movement, transhumance and salt route traffic of people between the Eritrean highlands and the Danakil depression in Tigray (Ethiopia), where the Saho-speaking ethnic group Irob live. Also in this case, Dore makes use of both historical information and recent data in order to make a diachronic reconstruction. The last section of the four initial ones having not to do strictly with Saho dwelling deals with the interesting subject of group identity and the categories of social order. The core of the description of Saho dwelling is contained in the following six sections and relevant subsections. It starts with the description of temporary and transhumance dwelling in the Danakil lowlands. The main kind of house in those area is the *daasa*. It has a conical structure without central pole, that is normally compared to the highland Tigrayan *agdo*, even if there could be significant differences between the two. It also recalls the Arab *tukul*. Another, more permanent kind of housing is discussed in the following section 5.2. "Transformation and Tigrayan influence in housing". Here the *naxsa* is introduced. It is a rectangular stone house with flat top derived by the Tigrayan *hədmə*, probably under to pressure towards more permanent farming living style of the Tigrayans and the influence towards building innovations exercised by the Italian colonial presence. While point 5.2. provides mainly an historical account of the birth and the development of the *naxsa*, its sub-sections 5.2.1. and 5.2.2. describe its structure and shape and the internal and external annexes. For the Irob of Tigray (Ethiopia), the farmhouse is called *hidmo*, as among the Tigrayans, and not *naxsa*, as in the rest of the Saho territory. With *naxsa* they only refer to the flat roof of an *hidmo*. The *hidmo* is introduced, in section 6. and more detailed information is provided in 6.1. where an exemplary case of *hidmo* building and the way life develops around it is nicely described. Subsection 6.1.1. presents the interesting topic of gendered division of space in a *naxsa*. In a Irob house, women and men have different tasks and perform different activities. The difference is marked also spatially with an area reserved to women and one to men, divided by a small wall or even a curtain. The demographic and economic growth of a family leads to the need to expand and modernize a house, making often use of new materials. The more and more common use of these materials, in particular cement blocks and zinc for the roofs is the object of section 6.2. "Innovations in housing". What follows, 6.3. "Borders, lands, rights and social relations" and 6.3.1. "*Hidmo* and social

reproduction” has less to do strictly with the history, structure and use of Saho houses, but more with the social dynamics developing around them. The section closes with a small section on Irob *hidmo* management of agricultural and pastoralist spaces (6.4.). To pastorals spaces is also devoted section 7, that introduces and develops the concept of *abur*. It is the sheep and goat shelter made of dry-stone walls, wooden poles and leafy branches. Particularly in the Irob area, it is synonym of settlement. In colonial time the dimension of villages was counted by the Italians in terms of number of *abur*. So far, there is no detailed discussion on the building techniques of the houses. The gap is filled in section 8 and sub-section 8.1., the second of which is particularly devoted to the differentiated activities between men and women in constructing a house, in which the role of women is clearly marginal. The exclusively female work of food transformation in a house is treated under 8.2. A discussion on the movement between the Danakil depression and the Eritrean highlands was presented in the first section of this historical/anthropological account. Section 9 is completely devoted to dwellings in the Danakil depression, due to its remarkably unique ecological and cultural situation. 9.1. focusses on the Eritrean lowlands and, in particular, on the village of Buyya and its housing development. 9.2., instead, briefly deals with houses in the Ethiopian Danakil depression. Few lines in section 10 are spent on water points in the Saho and Irob areas. Dore’s part ends with an account on naming spaces and toponyms, that go together with spatial anthropisation. Sub-section 11.1., the very last one of this part, mentions a list of 217 toponyms collected by Italian colonial officers in 1940. The list, however, is not reported.

The encyclopedic part of the volume, by Moreno Vergari, Roberta Vergari and Ahmedsaad Mohammed Omer, presents a wealth of lexical material on Saho dwelling in Saho language. The entries amount to about 1300. Both dialectal varieties, northern and southern, are taken into account. The grammatical gender and number of nouns is indicated, but only if “fully ascertained” (note \* p. 139). It is noted that the expression of these categories is different between northern and southern Saho: in Irob, southern, Saho plural is normally feminine in gender, while in northern Saho it can be masculine and feminine. The point is interesting since it touches upon the controversial question of the gender nature of number in Cushitic languages, where in most of the cases number seems to be a value of gender (Mous 2008 and 2013). The lexicon is also comparative. Etymologies in the languages particularly historically and culturally related to Saho such as ‘Afar, Tigrinya, Tigre and, various kinds of, Arabic are presented. Sometimes there are parallels with Amharic and Ge‘ez. For example, with Amharic on page 152 the similarity between Saho *barkuma* “pillow, headrest” and Amharic ባርኩማ *bark’amma* “wooden headrest” is shown. Several other parallels with this language, however, are disregarded, such as, for example, Saho *af*, Amharic አፍ *af* “mouth” (p. 142), Saho *baraka* “uninhabited place, wilderness”, Amharic ባረሀ *bārāha* “desert” (p. 151), Saho *footha* “loincloth”, Amharic ፎጣ *foṭ’a* “towel”. In note \* of page 139, it is mentioned that two dictionaries of ‘Afar have been consulted for making comparisons with Saho. It could have been comfortable to have here the full bibliographic references since instead one has to go to an entry and look for an ‘Afar etymology, note the abbreviations referring to the two dictionaries, go back to the “Bibliographic abbreviations used in the etymologies of the encyclopedic lexicon (p. 30) and then to “Other references (pp.33-50)” (as stated above, distinguished from “References (of the contributors of this volume)” (pp. 31-33) and “Archives” (p. 50)). A good solution is to use the Eritrean spelling of ‘Afar words, which is more reader-

friendly than the Ethiopian and Djiboutian one. As pointed out, still in note \*, the latter uses *q* for the voiced pharyngeal fricative [ʕ], *c* in Saho and ‘Afar Eritrean spelling, *x* for *dh* [d], voiced apical retroflex, and *c* for *x* [ħ], voiceless pharyngeal fricative. Even the ‘Afar words from the two reference dictionaries are normalized to the Eritrean spelling since in these dictionaries they are originally spelled *à la* Ethiopian/Djiboutian. The abbreviations of the consultants’ names, the consultant is here called LRP “Language Resource Person”, are not in the abbreviations list. The same note indicates that these abbreviations are found in paragraph 3 of the Introduction. However, they are in paragraph 4 among the information provided about the research locations, under the entries “Main LRPs”. The note does not mention that loanwords from Italian are also marked with the Italian corresponding words, in standard Italian spelling, and there is no distinction between possible direct borrowings and loans arrived into Saho via other languages, Tigrinya and Amharic, first of all. I think this is interesting topic for further investigation. There are here and there problems with the phonetic transcription of terms written in Ethiopic script. For example, Tigre ቧትሮ “clay-jar” is transcribed [‘itro] while it should be [‘etro] (p. 171) and መኪነት “machine” (from Italian *macchina*) is transcribed [makkinät] and not [mäkkinät] (p. 228). Tigrinya መንድል “scissor” is transcribed [mändäl] and not [mändəl] (p. 230), መንድልቶ “holes in a yoke into which the rods of the yoke are inserted” is transcribed [mändälto] and not [mändəlto] (p. 230) and ምሥራት “laying a foundation” transcribed [mäsərrät] and not [mäsərrat] (p. 234). The word in Ethiopian script is missed for Tigrinya [kanšälo] “gate” (from Italian *cancello*). There must have been technical problems outside the control of authors and editor. Very interesting is the presence of proverbs, poems and blessings in which some words have a role.

The present review shows that this volume is an outstanding piece of work. Reliable, extensive, well-structured, it is to be taken as a model for future anthropological, historical and linguistic thematic research on under-studied ethnic groups and their languages. By now it is definitely the reference publication on Saho dwelling and beyond, as the author are the reference scholars as for Saho culture and language. The critical points I underlined are only marginal and basically do not touch the core of the description. To conclude, I can just applaud the authors and the editor for this excellent piece of work and thank them for their contribution in making the Saho better known worldwide.

Graziano Savà (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)