

## Introduction

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The section “Articoli” of this special issue of *Ethnorêma* is entirely devoted to the “Atlas of the Traditional Material Culture of the Saho” (ATMCS) of Eritrea. This project was born in 2007, as a collaborative enterprise between the non-profit association “Ethnorêma”, the Department of African and Arab Studies (DipSRAPA) of the Oriental University of Naples, and the Department of Historical Studies (DSS) of the “Ca’ Foscari” University of Venice. Both the team of “Ethnorêma” and G. Banti of the DipSRAPA had been working for more than ten years on the Saho language, and this had already produced several publications such as Vergari & Vergari (2003), Vergari (2005) as well as Banti & Vergari (2005). On the other hand, G. Dore of the DSS had been studying since 1990 the ethnography of some groups of northern Eritrea and of the Eritrean and Ethiopian highlands on the basis both of direct field research and of early colonial sources. Carried out in close co-operation with the Ministry of Education of Eritrea, the ATMCS project aims at documenting the traditional material culture of the Saho, its variation across the different Saho-speaking communities of Eritrea, the terminology it is associated with as well as more general dialect variation in phonology, grammar and the lexicon.

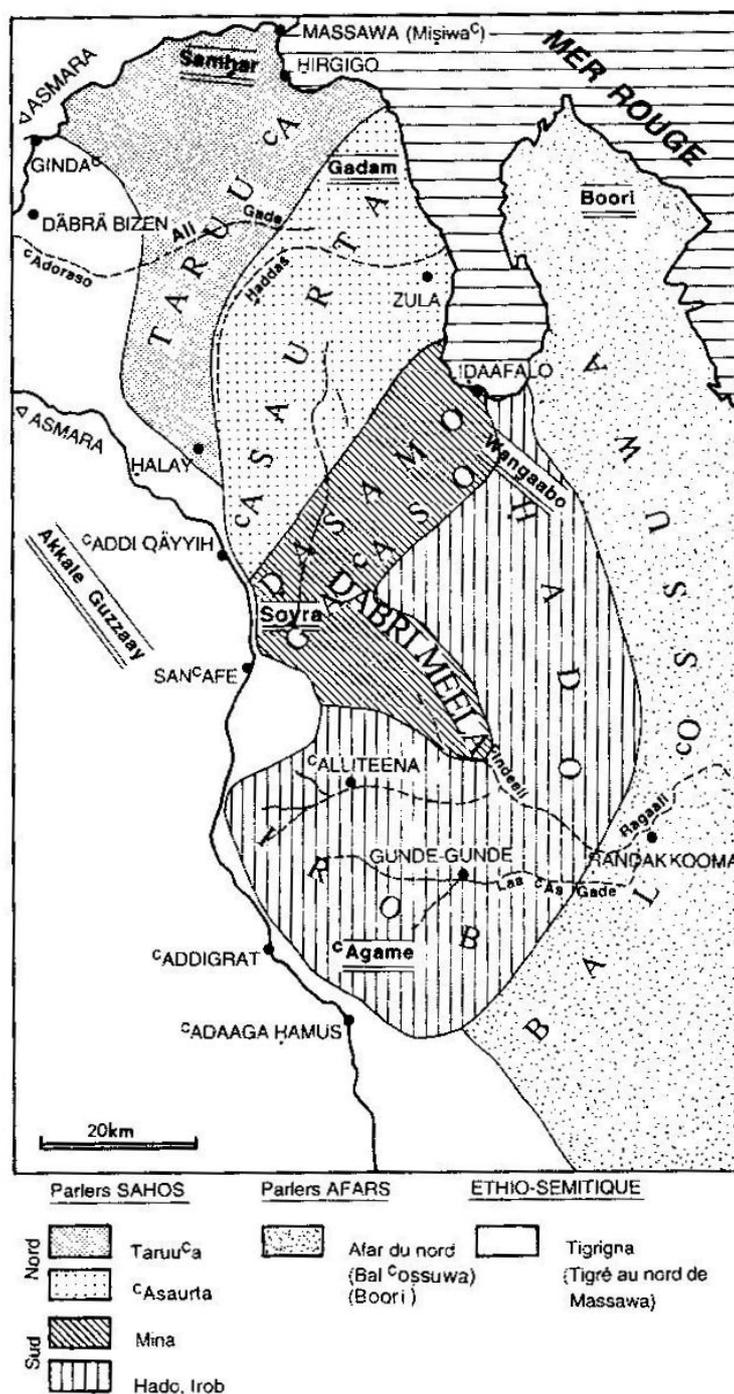
### ***The Saho and the documentation of their language and cultural heritage***

The Saho speak one of the nine national languages of modern Eritrea, and traditionally live south of Asmara and Massawa down to the Afar depression. In Eritrea they are a linguistic minority of ca. 190,000 native speakers, according to Lewis (2009). Southern Saho dialects are also spoken by ca. 23,000 people belonging to the Irob and a few smaller groups on the other side of the Ethiopian border, mainly in Tigray. Whereas the Saho-speaking groups of Tigray are settled agriculturalists, most of the Eritrean Saho have had since their earliest accounts by European travellers a mixed farming and pastoralist economy. Their herds of cattle graze in the highlands of the Debub and (the southern part of) the Northern Red Sea regions, and are moved during the rainy season to the coastal lowlands, while fields are cultivated both in these two areas and on the escarpment. Some central Saho-speaking groups also drove their herds to graze in the appropriate season in the fertile Hazamo plain, south-west of Caddi Qayyix<sup>1</sup> (cf. Conti Rossini 1908). During recent decades, the Ethiopian occupation, war and drought caused several thousands of Eritrean Saho to flee to the Sudan or other countries, or to be resettled as farmers in the western lowlands of Eritrea, mainly in the Gash Barka region. The loss or dramatic reduction of many herds caused settled farming also to play an increasing role in the economy of many

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<sup>1</sup> Saho place and personal names, and italicized words are spelt here with the official Eritrean Saho orthography that uses, e.g., *c* for pharyngeal [ʕ], *x* for [ħ], *dh* and *rh* respectively for retroflex [d] and [ɾ], etc. For further details see the relevant parts of the papers by Moreno and Roberta Vergari and by Giorgio Banti and Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar in this issue of *Ethnorêma*.

traditional areas of the Eritrean Saho, while only a small portion of them engage in trade, teaching or other services or tertiary activities.



The traditional Saho-speaking areas of Eritrea and Ethiopia (from Morin 1995)

Language shift and loss of the traditional culture are widespread among the Saho refugees in Sudan and the resettled groups in the western lowlands of Eritrea, even though the Eritrean Ministry of Education tried to stem this by establishing a few Saho primary schools in the Gash Barka, e.g., in Mayshigli. Loss of the ancestral language

is also increasing among the Irob of Tigray, who now see themselves as a heavily threatened linguistic minority. Instead, the language is not particularly endangered in the traditional Saho-speaking areas of the Eritrean Debub and Northern Red Sea regions, where several children and women are still wholly monolingual in rural areas, and 39 Saho primary schools have been set up for more than 5000 students (Ministry of Education 2007), that use Saho books for Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, Life Skills, and Saho Language. Such books are, however, in Written Saho, a standardized and partly koineized variety (cf. Banti & Vergari 2008) and it is to be expected that many local features of all dialect areas will slowly disappear from the speech of the younger generations.

However, it is the traditional culture that is being lost in several areas of life because of war, drought, and the growing impact of modernization. For instance, while wedding songs such as the *margaddiino*, *nazme* religious poetry, and work and children songs are still quite alive, the political *cadar* poetry of the great poets like Farhekoobe (died 1867 or 1868) and Xajji Saalix Xindago (died in 1993), that was closely linked to the traditional power structure of the *reezon* ('clan chiefs', sing. *reezanto*), declined during the Ethiopian occupation, and didn't find a renewed place in the new political organization after independence. Today, the *cadar* poems of the great poets of the past are highly revered (cf., e.g., Ibrahim Mohammed Ali 2007: 76-160, and the articles on this topic by Axmadsacad Maxammad in the first issues of the mimeographed Saho journal *Xanlake*), but there are no new poets that equal their fame across Saho society. It is the popular culture of male and female singers, who often compose themselves their songs on nationalism, social issues and love, with formal and stylistic procedures similar to those of *cadar* poetry, that are now well known in all Saho communities.

The shift to settled agriculture and increasing sedentarization causes knowledge about cattle herding to be less widespread than in previous times, and many kinds of traditional temporary dwellings to be replaced by permanent buildings both in the highlands and in the lowlands. Traditional architecture made much use of tree trunks and branches, but deforestation and the laudable attempt by the Eritrean Government at reverting it by placing severe restrictions on tree cutting causes many new homes to be built with concrete bricks, with zinc roofs and iron doors. Early accounts such as those by the Italian mission of 1905-06 (Dainelli & Marinelli 1912; Ciruzzi *et al.* 2002) point out that at that time there were no specialized craftsmen or craftswomen in the Saho settlements: every man was able to build his own house or help others to build theirs, and manufactured the wooden objects needed in his household, such as the large bowls known as *koora* or *galadda*, while every woman was able to tan animal skins, prepare leather objects, weave dum palm fibres and manufacture clay containers. This is no longer so. Stone buildings in the highlands are increasingly built by specialised masons, who are sometimes also called in the lowlands for building the stone houses with which the wealthier families are slowly replacing the traditional *macdani* dwellings made of wooden poles, branches and grass. With the only exception of traditional beehives, wooden objects are no longer used, and have been replaced by industrial plastic and metal tools and containers. Also clay pots and jars have disappeared almost everywhere. On the other hand skin mats and, especially, leather containers of different sizes are still prepared by several women as part of their

daughters' dowries, even though they are increasingly replaced by objects in other materials. The only traditional female handcraft that is still quite alive is weaving dum palm fibres for producing mats, baskets, and other kinds of containers, even though also synthetic coloured raffia is now sometimes used.

Thus, even though some aspects of the cultural heritage and handcrafts are still alive in the traditionally Saho-speaking areas of Eritrea, it is clear that many of them have vanished or are in sharp decline, and that the linguistic and cultural knowledge that is associated with them will disappear during the next decades. Documenting what is still to be seen of them is thus an important task, and even more their variation in the different Saho areas, with an approach that associates contemporary language and culture documentation (see, e.g., Bird & Simons 2003, and Gippert *et al.* 2006) with the *Wörter und Sachen*, i.e., 'words and things' approach that played an important role in the study of Romance and German dialectology and traditional material culture during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the particular case of the Saho, Italian sources from the colonial age provide a wealth of useful data on their material culture at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as shown in considerable detail by Giovanni Dore's two contributions as well as by Elena Pacini's one in this issue. In particular, the "Eritrean Mission" of 1905-06 by A. Mochi, L. Loria and others crossed the core Saho-speaking areas of that time and collected an impressive amount of data on how they lived, as shown by Mochi (1906a, 1906b), Dainelli & Marinelli (1912), Loria (1912, 1936), Venieri (1935) Ciruzzi *et al.* (2002), etc. The objects collected by that mission were brought to Italy, and part of them is still displayed in the Museum of Natural History of Florence (Section of Anthropology and Ethnology). In this manner, the objects and practices that are observed today can be compared with those of more than one century ago. This diachronic depth provides the particular enterprise of documenting the cultural heritage of the Eritrean Saho with a dynamic dimension: what can be documented is not only what exists today in the different areas they live in, but also how it has changed and evolved during the last 100 years.

There also are rich linguistic data from the past, but not all of them are equally reliable. Indeed, the three major dialect areas of Saho, i.e., its northern, central and southern dialects have been studied by Conti Rossini (1913),<sup>2</sup> Reinisch (1878a, 1889, 1890) and Reinisch (1878b), respectively. Later data on central and southern Saho are provided by Welmers (1952) and, respectively, by Plazikowsky & Wagner (1953). However, Reinisch (1878b) and Plazikowsky & Wagner (1953) describe Irob Saho as it was spoken in Tigray, not the other southern Saho varieties spoken in Eritrea. Worse still, the representation of vowel length and of some consonants is not wholly reliable in the older sources, and especially in contributions written by non-linguists, such as the anthropologists and geographers of the Eritrean Mission of 1905-06. In such cases, one has always to bear in mind that they were communicating with their Saho informants through interpreters, and that some of the terms they report could actually

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<sup>2</sup> Capomazza (1910-1911) is a lexicon of northern Saho from the Casawurta, but its Italian spelling makes it in many cases very difficult to identify the Saho words he mentions, especially when they are now obsolete ones that most present-day speakers don't know anymore. Some data on central Saho can be found also in Conti Rossini (1908: 31 ff.).

be in their interpreters' language rather than in Saho. More recently, surveys of Saho dialects have been prepared by Morin (1994, 1995), who discusses a small number of phonological, grammatical and lexical features that characterize the major Saho and Afar dialect areas, and by Ibrahim Mohammed (1997)<sup>3</sup>, who elicited a list of basic lexical items using the official Eritrean orthography, without marking tones nor finer phonological details in the realizations of vowels and consonants. A more detailed survey of the Eritrean Saho dialects was thus needed, in order to document more phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical details and charting them as isoglosses into a report that can be useful not only for the applied purpose of developing Written Saho, but also of the scientific study of the dialectology of this language and of documenting its rich variation before it is lost in the speech of the younger generations.

### *The ATMCS project*

It has already been mentioned above that the ATMCS project, launched in 2007, aims at documenting the traditional material culture of the Saho in Eritrea, and the present situation of their dialect variation. In particular, it is collecting data on the following cycles of traditional activities:

- a.) bee keeping and honey harvesting;
- b.) traditional buildings (houses, enclosures etc.) and how they are built;
- c.) preparing leather objects;
- d.) preparing mats and other objects with plant fibres;
- e.) animal husbandry;
- f.) cultivating different domesticated plants;
- g.) food (acquisition, transformation, cooking, eating and commensality).

Field research is being carried out in different locations of Eritrea, that have been chosen for representing different dialect varieties of Saho as well as the above mentioned cycles of activities as they are carried out by native speakers of this language. In each documentary location local informants are administered specific questionnaires in order to collect data about:

- these activities;
- the artefacts that are used for performing them;
- how such artefacts are used;
- who builds them and how;
- technical knowledge and how it is transmitted;
- popular beliefs, tales and proverbs about such artefacts;
- dialect variation.

Research is done by Italian scholars and Eritrean researchers who have been trained during the first stage of the project. Drawings, pictures and audiovisuals of the different artefacts and kinds of activities are being produced, in order to document as fully as possible the above seven cycles as well as their interactions. The new data obtained in the above ways are then compared with the existing descriptions, pictures

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<sup>3</sup> A shorter version of Ibrahim Mohammed's report is included in Daniel Tecl'emariam *et al.* (1997: 36 ff.).

and collections of artefacts that have been created during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, e.g., by the already mentioned “Eritrean Mission” 1905-1906 (A. Mochi, L. Loria etc.).

In addition to the wealth of dialectological data that are gathered in this manner during the interviews on material culture with the informants in the various documentary locations, a dedicated dialect questionnaire has been developed. It includes 130 questions on lexical items from different areas of the basic and cultural lexicon, on their phonology and morphology, on morphophonemic and tonal features of verb inflection, on different sets of pronouns and interrogatives, on numerals, and on several aspects of syntax.

Different meetings and workshops were held in 2007, 2008 and 2009 in Castelnuovo Scrivia (Alessandria), Bolzano, Naples and Asmara on language documentation, techno-cultural anthropology and dialect atlases. Several travels were also done to the Section for Anthropology and Ethnology of the Museum of Natural History in Florence, in order to work on the Saho materials collected during the “Eritrean Mission” of 1905-1906.

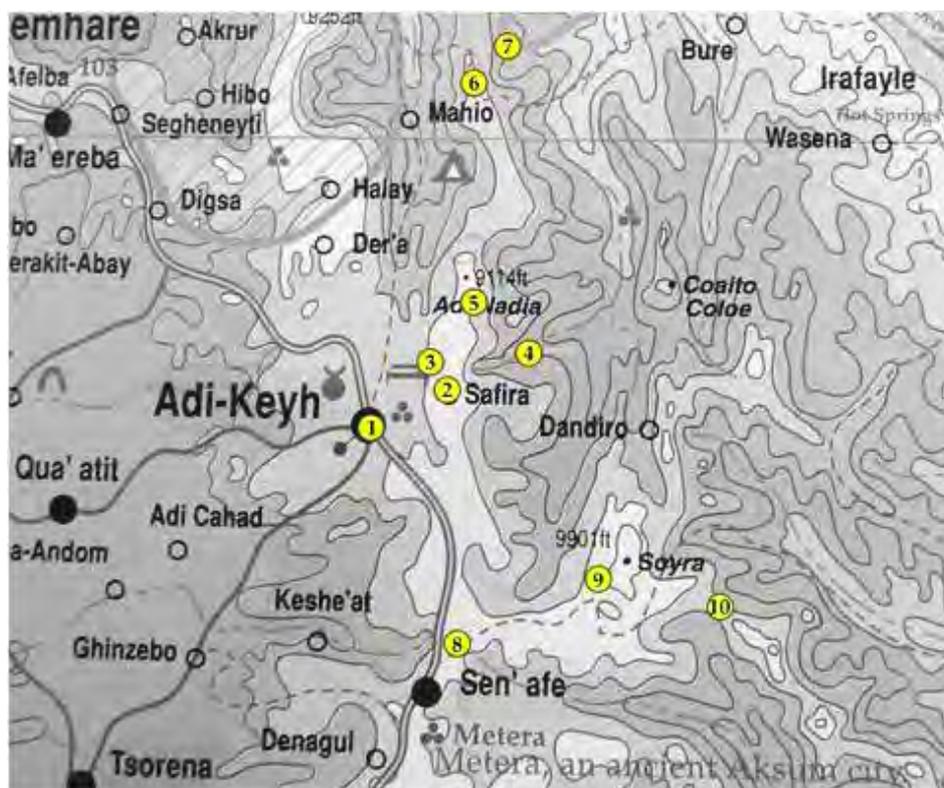
The first ATMCS field campaign in Eritrea took place in January and February 2008, the second one during the same months in 2009. A third campaign is planned for January-February 2010. Caddi Qayyix and the villages of Safiira, Ciyaago, Kaaribossa and Thiisha were visited during the 2008 campaign; in 2009 Caddi Qayyix, Safiira, Kaaribossa, Cishka, Dhamxina, Xaruba, Golo and Mako were visited. The lowlands of the Red Sea coast will be visited in 2010. The following cycles of activities have been documented:

- bee keeping (Ciyaago, Kaaribossa, Dhamxina, Thiisha, Mako),
- traditional buildings (Safiira, Kaaribossa, Thiisha),
- traditional artefacts in leather and plant fibres (Safiira),
- animal husbandry (Golo and Xaruba, also with informants from the nearby villages of Maahiyo and Raaw),
- cultivation (Cishka, Kaaribossa, Golo),
- other aspects of the Saho cultural heritage, such as poetry and festivals associated with the different cycles of activities (Caddi Qayyix).

The campaigns were carried out by the Italian team and the local coordinator, Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar, of Caddi Qayyix.

The local researchers and informants represented different Saho clans:

- a.) Minifire: Faqhat Xarak, Gacaso (speaking different varieties of Central Saho);
- b.) Dabrimeela (speaking a variety of Central Saho);
- c.) Casawurta: Casaleesan and Casakare (speaking Northern Saho);
- d.) Xasabat Care (speaking Northern Saho);
- e.) Xazo (speaking Southern Saho).



The approximate positions of the ten documentary locations visited by the ATMCS team in 2008 and 2009 (adapted from International Travel Maps 1997):

- |                 |             |
|-----------------|-------------|
| 1. Caddi Qayyix | 6. Dhamxina |
| 2. Safiira      | 7. Xaruba   |
| 3. Ciyaago      | 8. Thiisha  |
| 4. Cishka       | 9. Golo     |
| 5. Kaaribossa   | 10. Mako    |

In particular, the main informants have been:

- Ibraahim Shuum Maxmud “Xajji” Xammad Moosa and “Xajji” Siraaj “Xajji” Maxammad Cumar, at Caddi Qayyix
- Xaliima Saalix Axmad, Xaliima Idirish Cumar, Maxammad “Xajji” Cumar “Xajji” Axmadsacad and “Xajji” Suleeman Cumar Maxammad, at Safiira
- Maxammadnur “Xajji” Axmad “Baska”, at Ciyaago
- Axmad Maxammad Axmadsacad, at Cishka
- Maxammadcali Axmad Maxammad and Saalix Cumar Ibraahim, at Kaaribossa
- Maxmuud Ibraahim Aboobakar and Maxmuud Maxammad Ibraahim, at Dhamxina
- Axmaddin Cabdalla Ibraahim, Maxammad Axmad Idris, Cusban Sacad Moosa and Ibraahim Maxammad Cali, at Xaruba
- Cumardiin Ibraahim Ismaacil, at Thiisha
- Maxammad Axmad Xigo, Cabdu Yoosuf Cabdu, Suleyman Ismaacil Suleyman and Siraaj Cabdalla Axmad, at Golo
- Xammad Adam Axmad, at Mako

During the interviews it has been possible to record ca. 40 hrs. of audio files, 10 hrs. of video files, and to take ca. 1300 pictures. Hundreds of new words have been recorded for the special lexicons of the above mentioned cycles of activities, together with detailed explanations about the objects and the actions they indicate. Preliminary inquiries on poetry and on festivals associated with the above cycles of activities have also been carried out with two well-known Saho elders in Caddi Qayyix.

The questionnaire on dialect variation has been fully developed only in the second half of 2009, and will be administered during the 2010 field campaign.

Work has been done also in Asmara before and after the two field campaigns, especially on the words that had been collected. To this purpose, the ATMCS team worked especially with Abraahim Maxammad Cali, coordinator of the Saho Panel of the Department of General Education (Ministry of Education), and with well-known Saho scholar Cabdulqaadir Saalix Maxammad. The Eritrean coordinator of the project, Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar, came to Italy in July-August 2008 and 2009, where he collaborated especially together with the team of *Ethnorêma* in archiving and provisionally classifying what had been collected during the two field campaigns.

Finally, the ATMCS project has been presented during three seminars: (i.) at the Dalarna University in Falun (Sweden) in November 2008, at the “Ca’ Foscari” University of Venice on 8 May 2009, and at the IsIAO (Italian Institute for Africa and the East) in Rome on 19 November 2009.

### ***This issue of Ethnorêma***

This special issue of *Ethnorêma*, with its five articles on Saho beekeeping and ethnography, is the first major publication of the ATMCS. The topic of beekeeping has been chosen because of the continuing role it plays in the economy of several Saho-speaking communities of the Eritrean highlands, and because the data that had been collected during the first two campaigns were already sufficient for being displayed in an organized way.

The first essay by Gianni Dore discusses the “Eritrean Mission” of 2005-06 among the Saho, by setting it within the wider context of the newly-born Italian ethnographic research of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It depicts the methodology of inquiry used by Mochi and the other Italian researchers, the colonial framework of those years, and the complex and ambiguous relationships between the researchers, the colonial administrators, the local chiefs and the inhabitants of the Akkälä Guzai region. As mentioned above, that mission collected a considerable number of Saho objects and other ethnographic documents and brought them back to Italy. Elena Pacini’s paper describes how this major ethnographic collection was kept and partly displayed in what has now become the Museum of Natural History of Florence (Section of Anthropology and Ethnology, MNAE). The scientific theories and ideological background that underlie that manner of documenting the cultural heritage of this Eritrean population are discussed in fine detail and placed in their appropriate historical context. At the same time this young

scholar discusses contemporary, less ethnocentric approaches to the documentation of material culture.

Gianni Dore's second essay shows the wealth of data that an intelligent and critical analysis of the Italian colonial sources can yield on a specific ethnographic topic such as beekeeping and the traditional production of honey. This paper introduces the second set of articles, that are specifically devoted to Saho beekeeping. Moreno and Roberta Vergari's contribution displays the data that have been collected on this topic by the ATMCS team in the format of an "encyclopedic lexicon", a way of documenting the cultural and linguistic heritage that is being adopted by several scholars. The best example that had appeared so far for a language community of the Horn of Africa is Leus & Salvadori (2006), an encyclopedic dictionary of the culture of the Boraana, an Oromo-speaking group that live between southwestern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. The contribution by the Vergaris shows how historical accounts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dialectological data and audiovisual material can be integrated into a very rich documentation of this particular area of the cultural heritage of the Saho-speaking communities. Finally, Giorgio Banti & Axmadsacad Maxammad Cumar's paper discusses twelve proverbs on bees and honey in different dialectal varieties of Saho and a contemporary text on beekeeping drawn from one of the school boos that are used today in the Eritrean Saho schools. The detailed linguistic analysis of these texts, that are displayed both in their written form and as audio files, is associated with a discussion of the formal features of the twelve proverbs that highlights the parallels with what is known about the formal organization of Saho poetry.

Since several bibliographical items have been cited in more than one of the above contributions, a unified bibliography appears at the end of the monographic ATMCS section in this issue.

### ***Conclusions***

As stated above, this special issue of *Ethnorêma* presents the first results on one of the seven cycles of traditional activities that the ATMCS project focuses upon. An update on beekeeping and, especially, contributions on the other cycles will follow in the near future. Expertise acquired through this project can also be extended to other traditional cycles of activities of the Saho-speaking communities, as well as to other language groups of Eritrea, in order to achieve a full documentation of the cultural heritage of the people of this country.

Finally, the ATMCS team wishes to express its gratitude to the Ministry of Education of Eritrea, and particularly to H.E. Semere Russom, Minister of Education, and Petros Hailemariam, Director General of the Research Department and Human Resources Development; to the Saho Language Panel of the Department of General Education of the Ministry of Education of Eritrea; to the Museum of Natural History of Florence and its Section for Anthropology and Ethnology); to H.E. Osman Saleh, former Minister of Education and presently Minister of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea, who has been the first who enthusiastically approved the ATMCS project; and to Italian Embassy in Eritrea. Their support and encouragement during these years have been essential for organizing and implementing this project. The ATMCS team is also

deeply grateful to the Italian institutions and organizations that funded it, i.e., the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs institutions and its General Direction for the Cultural Promotion and Cooperation (DGPCC), the Italian Institute for Africa and the East (IsIAO), the “Ca’ Foscari” University of Venice, the Oriental University of Naples, and the “Ethnorêma” non-profit association.