

Two languages of the Abaya Lake in Ethiopia

A team of anthropologists and linguists is working for the extensive documentation of Bayso and Haro, two Afroasiatic languages of the Lake Abaya region in Southwest Ethiopia. Bayso is a Cushitic language belonging to the East Cushitic branch. Haro is an Omotic language classified in the Eastern branch of the Omoto language cluster. Bayso has about 3500 speakers. Haro speakers number 200.

The Bayso and the Haro live on Gidicho Island (32km²) and some settlements scattered on the western shores. On the island, Shigima in the north and Bayso in the south are Bayso villages, while the Haro village lies in the middle of the two.

Of the two groups, Bayso are said to be native of the island. The reconstruction of their origin, however, has to account for striking linguistic similarities between their language and Somali, spoken 500 km away. The Haro are considered newcomers attached to the other East Omoto speaking islanders. They are hippopotami hunters by origin. Because of this practice and the habit to eat hippo meat they are despised by the Bayso.



Distribution of Bayso and Haro speakers on Gidicho Island and coastal settlements

Both the Bayso and Haro have diversified their economy towards weaving, fishing and trading by adapting to their lacustrine habitat of Lake Abaya. Fishing is the most practiced and lucrative activity. The two peoples master the art of using and building rafts of different dimensions. The bigger and most typical model is the Wollaabo (Bayso term, Zepa in Haro), which is characterised by a high front tip and a flat long queue.



Preparing fish (Nile Perch) in a Haro house

Bayso and Haro are first languages spoken at home. Nevertheless, the low population number, the community-internal use of these languages and Bayso's and Haro's proficiency in languages surrounding them are likely to negatively affect the speech habits of the two communities in the future. In the sphere of trade contacts multilingualism in Guji Oromo, Wolayta, Gamo and Amharic has developed. Amharic is also the language of administration and primary education. The Haro speak also Bayso and the other lacustrine East Omoto language Get'ame. Recently, some Bayso started to learn Haro. Due to the rise of water level and the lack of fertile land in Gidicho, many Haro and Bayso have been forced to migrate to the shores of Lake Abaya and live close to urban areas.



Traditional Zepa boats (Haro term, Woollabo in Bayso) on the coast in Alge

For both languages the project aims at the archiving of rich textual, audiovisual and lexical corpora. The documentary material will be accompanied by edited material such as grammatical sketches, dictionaries, anthropological and sociolinguistic profiles and material produced by the speech communities for language promotion and maintenance.



Bayso compound (with the typical distribution of the houses around the cattle space)

Specific study topics have been designed according to the research needs of the two languages. Grammatical and ethnographic description is a priority for Bayso since the language and the people are only known by sketchy descriptions. A specific descriptive linguistic topic is the complex relation between grammatical gender and number. On Haro there is a grammar (a PhD thesis) and an ethnographic work (an MA thesis).



Cotton weaving in Bayso

The research can, therefore, concentrate on sociolinguistic and anthropological aspects. In particular, the multifunctional language corpora on Haro will represent of sociolinguistic data focussing on gender. This will be combined with an anthropological perspective on gender issues including issues of kinship, intermarriage and interethnic neighbourhood. Another important tentative of recording is the one of the secret language only spoken by a few elders who are considered to be religious leaders.

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Bayso woman pouring liquid dough

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