

## **“Irob-Saho”**

### **As Documented by Leo Reinisch**

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One of the earliest, (if not the earliest) books written about the language of Irob people is that of Leo Reinisch published in 1878 in Vienna, Austria. Leo Reinisch, also named Simon Leo Reinisch, was an Austrian Egyptologist and Africanist. He was born on October 26, 1832 in Osterwitz, Austria and died December 24, 1919 in Maria Lankowitz, Austria. After completing his elementary school, he joined a church Seminary in his 14 years of age, where he soon drew the attention of his teacher because of his linguistic talent. Contrary to the wish of his parents, who wanted him to be a priest, he decided to study oriental languages and he embarked on a new breathtaking career.

From 1854 to 1858 he studied history, classical Philosophy, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Arabic and Coptic, at the University of Vienna. He received his doctoral degree in 1859 from the University Of Tübingen. In 1861 he qualified as a lecturer at the University of Vienna. In 1865 he undertook an extended trip to Egypt, where he gained new insights and it succeeded him also a sensational discovery “Inscription von Tanis” (the Inscriptions of Tanis). Since 1868 he worked as an associate professor and from 1873 onwards as a professor of Egyptian languages and archeology.

In addition to his profession of teaching and research, Leo Reinisch took over the editing and publication of important collections “Die ägyptischen Denkmäler in Miramar” (Egyptian antiquities in the castle of Miramar), which earned him “Goldene Medaille für Kunst und Wissenschaft” (The Golden Medal of Art and Science). It also earned him the assignment from the Emperor to build an Egyptian section in the archeological museum in Mexico. In 1866, Leo Simon Reinisch accompanied Emperor Maximilian as his private secretary to Mexico and started immediately an intensive collection of language materials and the study of languages in that country. Soon after, he studied the dialect-rich Otomi-language and its ancient Mazahua meanings, which was a milestone in the language research. He envisioned a great documentary

work on the ancient Native American languages. However after the turn of the political events in Mexico and the end of the Emperor, his huge projects remained mostly unrealized.

In the year 1873, he published an eminently important programmatic work “Der einheitliche Ursprung der Sprachen in der Alten Welt” (The single origin of languages in the ancient world) which brought him high recognition.

In 1884 Leo Reinisch became a member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences. In 1896 he was elected as president of the University of Vienna. He researched in particular the languages of the peoples of Eastern Africa and is regarded as the founder of Egyptology and African studies in Austria. The inclusion of African languages in his comprehensive language comparisons lead Leo Reinsich to a decade-long study of northeast African languages especially the Cushitic, as its pioneer for which he is internationally esteemed till today.

Dr. Reinisch made two major linguistic expeditions to Africa (1875/76 and 1879/80) and issued a variety of publications in about 20 different languages and dialects. Among those explored languages is “Irob-Saho” as he names it. In 1878 he published a book entitled “**Die Sprache der Irob-Saho in Abessinien**” (The Language of Irob-Saho in Abyssinia).

The book is composed of about 54 pages. It begins with a brief introduction about Irob people. Here the writer makes a short description of their geographical location, mentions the names of their sub-clans, their estimated demographical number and their way of living. In this section of the book, the author compares the way of life of the Irob people with that of other Saho speaking tribes and illustrates clear distinction between the two. He states that the Irobs were not nomads but settled people in the territory they currently occupy.

In regard to the origin of the Irob people the author narrates a short legend which, according to him, both the Irobs and the other Saho-tribes tell in conformity. According to that legend Irob people would be descendants of Greek immigrants who entered Ethiopia through the Red Sea port of Zula and settled in the territory they currently occupy. However he cautiously remarks that it is not decidable whether this legend is based in historical truth or it has its base in folks-etymology because, he says, there was no evidence for or against it.

Dr. Leo Reinisch noticeably states that the Irobs and their territory both geographically and politically were the integral part of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). However, he emphasizes on their privilege, the full autonomy the Irobs enjoyed within Ethiopia. He affirms that they were neither obliged to do military service for the “Negus von Abessinien” (King of Abyssinia) nor pay him taxes. He says, “The only obligation ‘Redanto’ (chief or headman) of Irob people has to fulfill for the Negus is to deliver him yearly, a fatty cow and a pot of honey as honorary tribute and recognition”.

Before going into the main subject of his book the author once again draws a contrast between Irobs and other Saho-tribes. He writes: “while all the seven Saho-tribes were converted to Islam from the Ethiopian Christianity since the last two hundred years, the Irobs remained the same, in preserving their Christian faith to present days”. He also states, that “since 1846 the Catholic missionaries (French Lazarists) settled among Irobs and they have built a mission house as well as a small Church in the valley of Alitiena”. About the success of the mission, he reminds his readers to refer to “*L’Abyssinie et son apôtre, ou vie de Mgr. Justin de Jacobis, évêque de Nilopolis et vicaire apostolique de l’Abyssinie. Paris 1866.*”

Dr. Leo Reinisch includes in his book a piece of text written in ‘Irob-Saho’, a translation of chapter XI of St. John’s Gospel, and the text is grammatically examined. He identifies the translator of the text as Abba Tesfa Maryam and he writes that he was an Irob-born catholic priest from Alitiena who was educated as a priest in the Mission House of Alitiena. He also informs that the said priest died in 1877 in Bogos/Keren.

The writer continues with his book mentioning in few lines, the alphabets which do not exist in Irob-Saho and the alphabets/*sounds* which exist solely in Irob-Saho. He describes to his readers *which* Latin alphabets he used to represent *sounds* which only-exist in Irob-Saho. Similarly, one can see in Abba Tesfa Maryam’s text (older than 134 years) how these *sounds* are written in the Ge’ez alphabet.

In line to this context, it is natural to say that it would be worthy to look into these and other similar old texts and books which may exist and consider them, in order to build our language on a solid ground, having historical continuity (keep the chain). Gathering old texts from where they might be, studying them and considering them would also be useful in avoiding any possible creation of confusion which may arise from non-uniformity and contradictions between old texts and new texts appearing right now in texts recently published. Hence, it would be helpful to exchange studies and views, for example, in terms of which alphabet should be used to represent what *sound*, for sounds existing only in Saho. Therefore, highest responsibility and prudence is demanded from each of us in our effort to move forward the advancement of our language. We must avoid conclusions and decisions that may come “out of the blue” without considering the past and studies currently being carried out by others. Doing so may later create arbitrary and anarchic way of reading our language in that way causing confusion and other problems to our Irob society in general and our new generation in particular.

Subsequent to the short introduction in the first 2 and ½ pages of his book, the writer devotes almost all the remaining 52 pages to his main subject. The subject matter here is Irob-Saho. He deals primarily with the grammar. He schematizes it systematically and methodically.

To those who want to have a look at the book, read it, and use it as references and/or for further researches, please click on the following for the book-link.

<http://ia700409.us.archive.org/0/items/diesprachederiro00reinuoft/diesprachederiro00reinuoft.pdf>