

46th KUASS (Kyoto University African Studies Seminar)

Date and Time: 10 February 2016 (Wed), 15:00—18:00

Venue: Kyoto University Inamori Memorial Building, 3rd floor, #318 Seminar Room

Title: The invention of modern water in well watered places and their Pastoral Landscape (Marsabit County, Kenya)

Speaker: Dr. Benoit Hazard (CNRS-EHESS)

Abstract: In Arid and Semi-Arid lands of Northern Kenya, water has for long been described as a scarce and unavailable resource. Recent discourses on the discovery of a deep underground water lake in Turkana are emphasizing the scarcity of water which is often synonymous with lack of water and part of the colonial discourse on ‘backward’ societies, even if these places are often correlated with natural resources on which the livelihoods of the inhabitants depend. For thousands of years pastoralists lived from resources provided by the desert ecosystem of Marsabit County. Although the population engages in different livelihood ventures, pastoralism is the backbone of their economy, the invention of modern water challenges the biocultural frontiers of pastoralist livelihood as well as a nature/culture relations in the anthropocene ?

This paper questions the recent invention of a « modern water » in Northern Kenya. It underlines some evidence of availability of water in the arid lands of Marsabit county and raises some misconceptions of water management in a situation of hydrological stress and conservation practices among the pastoralists. From a pastoral land-use of the Chalbi desert, I first describe how well-watered places have shaped the borders of Gabra / Rendille / Dasanech territories and therefore what the Gabra imagine as their territory in the “disequilibrium system” of the Chalbi desert. Second, it presents some specific socio-ecological niches located on the eastern part of the desert in order to suggest that well watered places can be seen as a nexus to understand how past and present societies have adapted to socio-ecological changes. Today, many pastoral communities are increasingly switching towards agro-pastoralism, sedentary agriculture, wage labour or trade, partly in response to recent decimation of pastoral herds by drought and the current availability of moisture. But the same well-watered places remains important in the delimitation of northern Kenyan territories, their bio-cultural frontiers and their landscape.