

51st KUASS (Kyoto University African Studies Seminar)

Date and Time: 23 June 2016 (Thu), 15:00—17:00

Venue: Small Meeting Room 1, Inamori Memorial Foundation Building (3rd floor),
Kyoto University

Title:

**Suri sexual culture (Southwest Ethiopia): the case of ‘menstrual synchrony’.
An anthropological approach**

Speaker: Dr. Jon Abbink (Leiden University)

Abstract: This presentation discusses sexual culture among a non-literate agro-pastoralist group in Southern Ethiopia. It is often assumed that such populations, not well reached by modern education and medical facilities, are ignorant, and exposed to medical problems that the state ‘can solve’ as part of its ‘developmental promises’. I show that this is not the case in all domains of life. Suri sexual culture – the complex of ideas, behavioural rules and practices around the management of reproductive and sexual relations – is well developed and based of experiential knowledge. The case study is on the management of pregnancy. Among the Suri agro-pastoralists, young adolescent girls often assert that they menstruate together and regulate their own menstrual cycle, relating it to the phases of the moon. “Menstrual synchrony” is a much debated phenomenon in the scientific literature. Rather than giving immediate credence to its existence, I claim that the young, unmarried Suri girls - well aware of all biological facts around procreation, the fertility cycle and pregnancy prevention - follow a cultural script of sexuality and aim to fit physiological facts into a sociocultural mould. They use the synchrony assertion to change behaviour and thereby to maintain sexual independence and choice of partners in a society that is marked by significant gender equality but also by individual competition.

I tentatively assess the plausibility of the Suri girls’ claims to menstrual synchrony, and elaborate an interpretation of Suri female sexual/reproductive strategies as enhancing women’s agency in a society marred by growing internal instability, conflict, and an uncertain future.