

Contemporary ethnography of African deserts

Sabato 24 settembre / Saturday 24 September 09.15-11.00

CONVENOR: Tilman MUSCH (Bayreuth University-Germany), Abdoulaye MOHAMADOU (Abdou Moumouni University, Niamey-Niger)

DISCUSSANT: Saverio KRÄTLI (IUAES)

ABSTRACT: Commonly, we consider deserts as empty spaces associated with the absence of humans rather than with their presence. This panel proposes, on the contrary, to study African deserts as highly dynamic human spaces. We can observe in African deserts (in particular the Sahara) the clash of opposite power claims, increasing mass mobility through migration, the occurrence of highly diverse economies (mineral resources, smuggling, etc.) and accentuated religious manifestations. Deserts also generate multifaceted modern phenomena linked to their centuries-old histories and unique natures, for example the creation of national parks and touristic exploration, and they are highly valued by science, art and literature. Due to the interests they represent for often antagonistic actors, deserts acquire increasing global importance. The panel invites contributions from different scientific disciplines, which focus on modern dynamics among humans or on changing human-environment-relations in deserts.

PAPERS:

Saverio KRÄTLI, *Saharan livelihoods: development and conflict*

Focusing on livelihoods, especially pastoral ones, the paper analyses key drivers of conflict and critical areas of socioeconomic potential. The analysis is based on the combination of a resilience perspective with the two concepts of *connectivity* and *antifragility*. Connectivity focuses on the *relationship* between places, which in the Sahara-Sahel complex dominated by variability/discontinuity, is more characterizing and meaningful than focusing on *location*. Antifragility relates closely to the concept of resilience but highlights the *capacity to benefit from shock*. Antifragility rests on keeping options open (“optionality”), a way of compensating for the limited power of prediction in highly variable contexts. Livelihood systems developed to take advantage of variability, such as pastoral systems, may be harmed by a decrease in optionality.

The Sahara is first and foremost a place where people live. Raising livestock remains the most widespread livelihood strategy, together with emerging services economy, oasis agriculture, and tourism. During the last generation, saharan livelihood systems have been placed under unprecedented pressure by the loss of control over part of the pastoral economy and by levels of in-migration that dwarf the experience of industrialised countries. Present conflicts in the Sahara are largely the result of the failure of states to deal adequately with the problems of the incorporation of pastoral and other marginal populations into the modern state; the uncertainty to which this gives rise; and the way drug smuggling, jihadism, kidnapping for ransom, and other activities have been used in the creation of an agenda not related to the concerns of Saharan residents. This failure has five interrelated components: political failure; economic failure; failure to establish the rule of law and prevent criminal activities; failure to control extremist Islamic forces; and failure to learn, and especially to recognize the effects of the long history of ill-advised interventions, and to make clear what the options are.

The rule of thumb is that Saharan livelihoods should be supported with interventions that strengthen *their* capacity for connectivity and their degree of optionality, and that they are made more fragile by interventions that weaken their connectivity and reduce their optionality.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Saverio Krätli. Research consultant specializing on the interface between science, policy and people in pastoral systems. Experience in Niger, Chad, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia, working on production strategies, conflict, and education. Editor of *Nomadic Peoples*, the journal of the Commission on Nomadic Peoples, International Union for Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES).

Greta SEMPLICI-Erika GRASSO, *Moving deserts: relations, "border humanities" and development. An analysis of social, cultural and environmental narratives and everyday practices in the "non-empty" space of Northern Kenya lowlands.*

ABSTRACT:

Nowadays the desert lowlands dividing the Horn of Africa from the *high potential areas* of Central Kenya, one of the most arid regions of Sub Saharan Africa, represent a crucial node of development plans in the region. The northern counties, for long neglected and, still today, undeniably marginalised, become an interesting analytical space where deserts are the framework of new forms of mobility, establishment of moral economies and conflictual international, national and local relations.

Entire populations devoted to mixed and complementary livelihoods live and survive in an precarious ecology threatened by global warming impacts and by increased level of competition over natural resources. By looking at the region from Marsabit and Lodwar, two of the major centres in Northern Kenya, one inevitably realizes how deserts, conversely to what reported by colonial officers at the beginning of the XX century, cannot be described as an "empty [...] blank space" (Brown, 1989:316). Yet, deserts emerge as social spaces embedded into people's trajectories.

New migratory patterns changed, adapting to humanitarian and government policies and to an unpredictable ecology, fill the colonial "emptiness" with "*border humanities*". The analysis of the desert we propose explore a broader concept of mobility: economic, cultural, social and environmental, adopting cultural meanings and perceptions and considering the impact of national policies on local movements.

Networks, connecting towns to villages through ethnic or clan-based relations or through models of what can be defined a "moral economy", show and prove deserts to be a dense, crucial and decisive space laying new challenges over the ideas of citizenship and marginality.

An in-depth study of marginal areas in Kenya, one of the most relevant actors in the international relations of the region, allows to move from a marginalized low-land narrative to finally look at deserts as a prime space, amidst uncertainty and change, where to find manifestation of every-day social, cultural and environmental tactics people use to negotiate complex challenges and in turn help us better understand their living and future scenario.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Greta Semplici is a DPhil Candidate at the Oxford Department of International Development. Her research investigates the problematic and challenging concept of resilience assuming it finds more grounded manifestation in the everyday tactics and narratives people use to negotiate complex challenges. She is looking at patterns of adaptation and change in contexts where crises/shocks/emergencies are not exceptions but the rule, being protracted or repeated over long periods of time. Her research is based in Turkana County, Northern Kenya, where she already spent a first year of extensive fieldwork.

Erika Grasso is a PhD student in Cultural Anthropology at Turin University and carries out research in Northern Kenya, in the Marsabit County, with particular focus on Marsabit town where she spent a year of fieldwork. She has studied the urban space in Marsabit and its everyday practices and narratives in order to

get a deeper understanding of Marsabit town and of the actual reality of a region characterised by fragile political, economical and social balances, as Northeastern Africa is.

Valerie HÄNISCH, *Two Brothers in the Wake of Gold*

ABSTRACT:

In April 2014 gold was found in the Sahara desert of northern Niger at two large sites, one located at the Algerian border and another closer to Libya. The news spread rapidly and men from all over the country ventured into the desert to take a chance on finding gold. Private investors set up infrastructure at record speed. Soon, thousands of men were digging in the rocks of Tibarakaten and searching the desert sand of Djado. With this unseen gold rush in a very remote region, the promise of wealth and modernity came hand-in-hand with new conflicts. In my presentation, I will tell the story of two Tuareg brothers from Agadez who tried their luck independently from one another. The older one travelled to Djado, the younger to Tibarakaten. The first invested all his property in the search for gold, the second went with nothing but an anvil and a hammer in his backpack. Relying on his skills as a blacksmith, he was offering his services to sharpen pickaxes, the tools used by gold diggers. I met both of them in Agadez at their parents' house in spring 2015. In the evenings they told the family about their experiences. Discussion and conflict arose around the question of whether they should search for gold and whether this reconciles with their Islamic faith or if they should better rely on the family's profession in craft which is founded on a highly esteemed norm of contentment. Thus, the two brothers pursued their careers in different ways. The younger one went back to the gold mines whereas the older one chose to continue his profession as smith and hence kept true to his notion of tradition. By retracing these discussions about modernity and continuity, I will reveal the debates in the desert town of Agadez about notions of religion, patience and everyday work, wealth and modernity but risk and uncertainty in the wake of gold.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Valerie Hänisch, M.A. in Social and Cultural Anthropology, is a PhD student at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), University of Bayreuth (Germany). Her PhD project is about the endogamous professional group of Tuareg blacksmiths in the North of Niger.

Tilman MUSCH, *Modern forms of desert travelling: Teda drivers and Toyota Hilux on ancient caravan roads*

ABSTRACT:

Since several decades, caravan trade in the Sahara is diminishing. Nevertheless, modern forms of business emerged, and where formerly camels transported dates, salt or other goods, now fast Toyota Hilux vehicles often have replaced the ancient forms of locomotion. The new actors are TubuTeda, linking Central Saharan towns as Sebha, Agadez or Dirkou with each other. New kinds of merchandises have emerged, and with the flux of migrants, the Sahara acquired anew global importance as a crossroad of things, peoples and ideas. The young Teda drivers manage crossing the desert space by adapting their long-lasting experience of mobility to exigencies of modern road making and by shaping the Saharan roads anew according to their own needs. Not least, the drivers get involved in and managed to master contemporary interactions with other travel communities. The present contribution proposes an ethnography of modern roadmaking and travelling interactions in the Sahara, which, despites being a "desert", gains more and more relevance as an ebullient and globally interlinked space.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Dr. Tilman Musch is anthropologist and research project director at Bayreuth University (Germany). His scientific interests are spatial anthropology, nomadism and ethnobiology in West Africa.

Nadia BELALIMAT, *Ethno histoire de l'hymne nationaliste azawadien : de la chanson prototypique à l'hymne, une ethnographie sur la longue durée*

ABSTRACT:

On a déjà montré ailleurs (Belalimat 1996, 2003, 2008) comment, par la médiatisation sur cassette de leurs chansons dans les années 80 et 90, bien avant Internet, les Tinariwen, avaient créé un mouvement culturel transnational intra-saharien d'adhésion à la cause du mouvement rebelle dans les régions touarègues du sud algérien, sud libyen, nord nigérien, nord malien. On va prolonger le questionnement de la performativité de ce répertoire dans le contexte de l'action du MNLA (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad) en 2012. C'est précisément ce processus de transmission de l'imaginaire national azawadien, qui nous intéresse ici. A cet égard, l'ethnographie du processus phénoménologique de la 'construction' de l'hymne azawadien permet de comprendre comment une chanson « prototypique d'un genre musical émergeant au début des années 1980 est désignée et reconnue, quarante ans plus tard (2012), comme l'hymne national d'un pays non encore édifié et encore moins reconnu, si ce n'est par ses partisans. Cet exposé permettra en outre de comprendre de l'intérieur les processus historiques de diasporas intra sahariennes, notamment entre le nord Mali et le sud libyen, à l'œuvre dans le nationalisme azawadien.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Nadia Belalimat est doctorante à l'EHESS (Musique, poésie et politique chez les Touaregs, Direction : Tassadit Yacine) et ingénieur d'études au CESSP. Elle travaille sur l'anthropologie de la musique contemporaine chez les Touaregs notamment sur l'ethnohistoire du groupe Tinariwen et la phénoménologie de son répertoire.