

67th KUASS (Kyoto University African Studies Seminar)

Date and Time: April 20, 2017 (Mon) 15:00-17:00

Venue: #318, Inamori Memorial Foundation Building (3rd floor), Kyoto University

Title:

Salt in northern Ethiopia in its socio-cultural context: What the use of salt bars as money tells us about economic culture and values of the traditional society

Speaker: Dr. Wolbert G.C. SMIDT (Associate Professor in Ethnohistory, PhD Coordinator "History and Cultural Studies" at the Department of History and Heritage Management (DHHM), College of Social Sciences and Languages (CSSL), Mekelle University)

Abstract:

This paper discusses the socio-cultural role of salt, especially rock salt bars, in the Ethiopian highlands' tradition. The usage of salt bars not only as a trade product, but also for barter and in fact as money or at least as quasi-money is reported even in ancient sources. Salt bars, called Amolé, were a universal means of exchange until the early 20th century. As anthropological research has virtually just started recently in the northern highlands, it was widely unknown that parts of that practice continue until today. While Amolé has lost its character as quasi-money, the networks of Amolé-producers, traders and belief-systems built around their work have remained very traditional. In a comparison with silver money, which was rejected in the past in many areas different from amolé, the analysis of the traditional role of amolé in society allows insights into an economic-cultural system which values relationships based on mutual exchange and favors some degree of economic egalitarianism.