

Indian Ocean World Centre

Fall Speaker Series

A Deep history of pastoralism in Eastern Africa: From the Origins of Domestication to the Indigenization of Pastoral Modernities

December 3 - Rm 116, Peterson Hall

3:00 – 5:00, Refreshments served

Recent archaeological findings show sacrifice of pre-domesticated aurochs near the Red Sea Hills, suggesting that an African site of cattle domestication may have been inspired by religious motives. Unlike the domestication process in the Middle East, which was associated with early agriculture, in northeast Africa it was carried out by hunting, fishing and foraging people. The cow then served as an icon of social identity and a source of prestige and meat, and only later as a source of milking. Associated with religious ideas emphasizing an overarching divinity, guilt and penance, blessing and cursing, sacrifice of cattle connected human and divine forces among early Nilo-Saharan peoples, who through Semitic-speakers came to influence the cultures of the Middle-East. Nilo-Saharan pastoralists flowed westward through the Sahara and southward down the Rift Valley, where they interacted (and still interact) with Eastern Cushitic societies, giving rise to mutual cultural influences. Today the long line of cleavage between them is a site of mutual influence, multilingualism, and enduring conflict, between Maa-speakers and both Oromo and Somali speakers.

The spread of pastoral societies marks processes of absorption and expansion, as herding cultures have created innovative institutions (segmentary lineages; age-sets; generation-sets) to allow decentralized economies to benefit from periodic and opportunistic forms of centralized political leadership. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, highly volatile forms of territoriality have been fixed in place, resulting in land loss through commodification of land rights. But many social institutions and husbandry practices have been perpetuated despite influences of the state and market, and more generally of cultural modernity, with the capacity for organized violence continuing to be directed at expansion, territorial defense, and livestock theft, using time-tried practices tied to veneration of livestock and their ritual roles. As education, religious conversion and national identities have grown, the indigenization of pastoral modernity still provides a cultural foundation for contemporary rangeland dwellers.

John Galaty

Anthropology, McGill University

General Inquiries

www.indianoceanworldcentre.com
iowc@mcgill.ca



McGill