Biology vs. culture in the sexual politics of an agro-pastoral society in Ethiopia: a case study of ‘menstrual synchrony’ claims among Suri girls.

Presenter: Professor Jon Abbink
Date: 5 November 2013
Time: 4.00 - 5.00pm
Location: The Cairns Institute Building D3 Rm 144
This is a free event.

About the Seminar:
Among the Suri agro-pastoralists, a relatively self-sufficient and independent people of ca. 34,000 in the extreme southwest of Ethiopia, 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 and still unresolved phenomenon in the scientific literature. Rather than giving immediate credence to the (intriguing) assertion of its existence, I claim that the young, unmarried Suri girls - who are well aware of all biological facts around procreation, the fertility cycle and pregnancy prevention - use this assertion to maintain sexual independence and choice of partners in a society that is marked by significant gender equality but also competition, reflecting women’s vital economic and social roles.

After a brief presentation of the (inter-disciplinary) debate on menstrual synchrony and the possible role of human pheromones, I describe Suri gender relations and sexual culture, using field data gathered in two villages. I then tentatively assess the plausibility of the Suri girls’ claims to menstrual synchrony, and offer an interpretation of Suri female sexual/reproductive strategies in a society marred by growing instability, male group violence, and an uncertain future due to far-reaching state interventions.

About the Presenter:
Jon Abbink is a Dutch anthropologist/historian and works as a senior researcher at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, where he is a member of the Executive Board and headed the research group ‘Social Movement & Political Culture in Africa’ from 2005 to December 2011. He is also a research professor of African ethnic studies at VU University, Amsterdam. He carried out anthropological field research in Israel in the 1980s and since 1990 in Ethiopia, on socio-political history ethnicity, political anthropology, and religious relations. His current interests are political transformations, the impact of (inter)national ‘development’ in Northeast Africa, religious culture, and the social roots and current strategies of religious community formation and political expression in NE Africa. Specific projects in Ethiopia deal with politics & religion in the public sphere, the ethno-history of three ethnic groups in south-western Ethiopia, and rural social history and livelihoods of Wolaitta, a South-Ethiopian region.