Marsabit: from the caravans to the shopping mall. Histories of an *accidental town* in Northern Kenya.

Erika Grasso
University of Turin
“Marsabit is a small town. It is an accidental town, grew as an accident. From my point of view it is an accident, it was neither supposed to be a town”

(Woche, Marsabit, May 2015)
An *un-kenyan* small town


“Where is Marsabit? Is it in South Sudan? […] A lot of Muslims are there... Al Shabab is there, isn't it?” (Seller, Nairobi, June 2014)

“Safe journey to Nairobi. Rest a bit and enjoy civility” (Abdikadir, Marsabit, April 2015)

“I'm travelling to Kenya. I'm going home to Meru” (Alice, Marsabit, May 2015)
Marsabit County

- 66.923,1 Km²
- Population (2009):
  Marsabit Country: 291.166
  Marsabit Central Location: 29.802
- 12 traditional communities:
  (Borana, Burji, Dassanatch, El Molo, Gabra, Konso, Rendille, Sakuye, Samburu, Somali, Turkana, Waata)
Pre – colonial past:

- nomadic pastoralists used to move in an open space
- Presence of hunters and gatherers on Marsabit Mountain
- Relationships and reciprocities that crossed the ethnic lines

Map: Brown 1989
1907: The Boma Trading Company – supported by the Colonial Administration - settled on Paradise Lake on Marsabit Mountain.

Colonial Administration: new idea of space. From an open space to a tamed space
Territorializing Ethnicity

The grazing areas imposed by the British Administration, restricting the rage of movement of pastoral nomads, hardened the relations between ethnic groups.

(Schlee 1989)
Shaping the Space

Territorialized Ethnicity:
- South-North polarisation
- Vertical hierarchies
- Political struggle

Everyday practices
- Un-polarized relations
- Horizontal connections
Ambivalence of the meanings that the town acquires

- From a point in an *open space* to the centre of a *tamed/closed space*
- Multiethnic centre surrounded by ethnically substantive areas
- Centre where the political struggle take place and where narratives about nationhood and citizenship are created
- Centre where several subjects produce and reproduce several histories
Ambivalence of the meanings that the town acquires

**Marsabit as a centre**

- **Territorial/Spatial dimension**
  A center or an area where a population is settled down and to which they refer to for any economical, political, social or cultural activity.

- **Social dimension**
  A center or a place in the space where individuals and groups are connected by common social and cultural interactions and activities.

**Marsabit as periphery**

- Marsabit is nothing but the capital of one among the most marginalized counties in Kenya.

- Old narratives about the Northern Frontier District are still used to describe Marsabit and its inhabitants as different from Kenya and Kenyans.
Marsabit, an *accidental town*

- Complementary of ethnic groups;
- Contingency of ethnic relationships;
- Ambivalence of the meaning and the role that small towns acquire for their inhabitants;
- Ambivalence of the role that marginalized areas and small towns acquire in African States.