The following concerns a paper presented during the International conference of the Euro-African Association for the Anthropology of Social Change and Development (<u>APAD</u>), entitled: *Development, Liberalism and Modernity: Trajectories for an Anthropology of Social Change,*
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The conference papers will be published.

<u>ICT and society in Sudan: a critical historical-anthropological approach</u>
<u>Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman</u>

Handout:

Since July this year we have been involved in studying mobile telephony in Sudan in its interaction with socio-economic relations and the wider context of communication technologies. The research is funded by the Kuwait-based telecommunication company Zain that is also active on the Sudanese market.

We propose to discuss several issues that are related to this type of research. A first issue concerns the relation of academic researchers with business companies: what new questions in relation to ethics and research emerge?

The second issue relates to the unequivocally positive image that communication technologies have in relation to development. It is often assumed without any further analysis that new ICT, such as the mobile phone and internet, will automatically contribute to the development of marginal regions. How can researchers meaningfully react to these assumptions?

Thirdly we would like to discuss methodological aspects that are related to research on ICT and society. Communication technologies themselves become part of the research methodologies and may guide the directions of research to varying extents.

The above questions will form the basis of our presentation during the conference.

In the paper for the conference we will focus on the results of one case study for the project, namely Juba (Southern Sudan), where the situation after the war is still extremely volatile and the policies related to communication have become part of the tensions and contradictions that are informing national and everyday politics in Sudan.

Case studies in Khartoum, Karima and Juba
Commissioned researchers, Peter Taban Wani and Hisham Bilal

Celtel – Dutch-based mobile telephone company, now owned by MTC.
Gemtel – A mobile telephone company established by SPLA, using the Ugandan country-code.
GOSS – Government of Southern Sudan (established after Peace Agreement in 2005)
Mobitel – Now Zain, Sudanese mobile telephone company.
MTC – Now Zain, Kuwait-based mobile telephone company
NTC – National Telecommunications Corporation, national regulatory body installed after the privatization process of 1993.
NOW – Network of the World, southern mobile telephone company, at present not operating.
SPLA – Sudan People's Liberation Army, that has fought the central government and now forms GOSS.
Sudani – Sudanese mobile telephone company of Sudatel, the privatised company in which the Sudanese state has many shares: on US embargo list.
Zain – Formerly MTC, now Middle-East and Sudan mobile telephone company.

Paper

ICT and society in Sudan: a critical historical-anthropological approach
Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman

Introduction
In the course of 2006 we (ie: Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh and Inge Brinkman) developed plans to conduct research on mobile telephony in its interaction with mobility, marginality and social relations in various parts of Africa. We felt it worthwhile to not only direct plans, debates and results on this topic to university circles, but also draw in people from the development sector and companies active in the communication sector. Within this framework a Dutch-based company (called Celtel) that operates mobile telephony in eighteen African countries, was contacted at a very early stage of the research plans. Their interest in research was clear and they considered sponsoring part of the study. In the meantime, however, they had become part of a Kuwait-based group (then MTC, now Zain) and as this group had recently also bought a Sudanese company (then Mobitel, now also called Zain), they were eager to acquire more information about Sudan and its communication sector. They therefore proposed to carry out a pilot study of half a year in the Sudanese context, with the prospect of a longer financial engagement (3-4 years) in case of success. The costs of this study were covered by the company, but the researchers were independent scholars attached to the African Studies Centre in Leiden and it was stipulated that academic freedom would be respected.

So it was that in July 2007 we set out to conduct research on mobile telephony in Sudan. The aim was mainly to conduct qualitative research and interview people from various networks, so as to come to an understanding the relations between social hierarchies and mobile telephony within the wider context of Sudan's history of communication technologies. The research was conducted in the capital Khartoum, in small town with a history in the transport sector in the north and the southern town of Juba, that has recently emerged from a long civil war but is still in an extremely volatile situation. The research was partly carried out by two commissioned researchers, Peter Taban Wani (Juba University in Khartoum) and Hisham Bilal (Khartoum University) and through three visits to Sudan of some weeks.

It is on the basis of the case study on mobile telephony in Juba that we would like to discuss ethical problems related to our research in Sudan.

Juba case
Juba is a town in Southern Sudan, a region emerging from a long history of war. Before the civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) Juba formed an important nodal point in the communication lines between North and South Sudan: there was a gravel road, a bridge over the Nile and there was river transport, telegraph lines and mail services. This connection was reinforced by Juba's position as an international trading and transport centre: gravel roads connected it with Kenya, Uganda and Zaire/Congo.

During the war, all this was nearly entirely destroyed. Juba remained in the hands of the central government and was frequently attacked by the opposition army of the SPLA. The roads were mined and no maintenance could be carried out. Food in town became extremely scarce and so very expensive. The port of Juba could only be used by the central government army, as the barges were frequently attacked. And Juba's bridge of the Nile was attacked and also because of overloading with the military vehicles and neglect fell apart. Many civilians fled, to Khartoum, to Uganda, and to other countries. Whereas others stayed in Juba or in the SPLA controlled zones within Sudan. Many families became separated because of this and people were very strong about the lack of communication during the war. Transport and communication largely became a prerogative of the military.

In 2005 a peace agreement was signed and this has had enormous consequences for the town. Many development agencies have started activities in the region and the GOSS (Sudan now being federal) established its capital here. Food is more readily available and hence cheaper: local agriculture is on the increase again and imports, mainly from Uganda, have become much easier as roads are open again. The port, built by Chinese, is open, although transport is still limited, the bridge will be repaired soon by a Kenyan construction company,

vehicles from the development agencies and the Southern government are driving up and down the dirt roads in town, there is construction everywhere: of roads, houses, government buildings, compounds for the development agencies, etc. And new communication technologies have become available, notably the mobile phone. The markets are rapidly expanding, the transport sector is growing fast.

The mobile phone first came in Juba before the war. It was Mobitel (now Zain) that came first and was mainly used by the central government and the army. Civilians using mobile phones were suspected of being SPLA supporters. And only after the peace agreement of 2005 the mobile phone became more widespread. This immediately led to problems: the capacity to cater for so many customers was not available, so the lines congested. When Sudani (also a northern company) and Gemtel (a company that had been used by SPLA and used the Ugandan country-code) came, at first the situation improved somewhat, but soon after their coming to Juba, the network became worse again.

Negotiations between the Government of Southern Sudan, the NTC (the regulatory body of Sudan dealing with the licenses etc) and the central government have stagnated. There is continuing disagreement between the parties about the precise conditions of network licensing and gateway usage. Representatives of the Southern government argue that Gemtel (and NOW) should be allowed to operate in the north, just as the Northern operators are entitled to enrol their network in the south. The problem that Gemtel is using a Ugandan dialling code also as yet stands unresolved. While the GOSS wants its own gateway separate of the North, the national licensing council NTC does not at all agree to this. Accusations of corruption and domination further aggravate the tensions between the various parties.[1] Because of these political controversies, both the Sudani and Mobitel networks only function intermittently in Juba and their roll-out plans have been stalled by the responsible politicians in GOSS. The permission granted to Gemtel to use the Sudanese country code has not yet been realized and the Gemtel network often does not function at all. In this sense, the legacy of the war still influences the possibilities for communication technologies.[2]

Because it saw its developments in the south blocked, Zain initiated negotiations with GOSS independently of the central government and the NTC. Zain's CEO, Khaled Muhtadi, said the following about the current relationship:

> In the south what we face so far is that the political issues between the governments of the north and the south reflect also in the relationship that they have with and their trust in the northern companies. We have invested heavily in this relationship and now have a healthy relationship. We intend to roll out our network in several of these states. The governments of these states are welcoming us as they have been waiting for telecom for a long time.[3]

As relations between the various parties in the South are still extremely sensitive, it is hard to foretell what directions these developments will take and what the implications will be.

Questions and issues:
There seem to be two related fields of questions and issues in the realm of the ethical aspects of this project:
1. research financed by a commercial enterprise:
a. critical assessment?
In the discourse employed by the mobile telephone companies extreme optimism is the rule. The mobile telephone industry active on the African continent displays an enormous faith in the possibilities that the new communication technologies may bring. In their happy-clappy brochures nothing but radiant faces, smiling children and happy people: the mobile phone world is a

[1] Interview 7; Interview 15; 'Stalled north-south MOU stalls mobile phone expansion in Sudan', *Gurtong Peace Project*, General News (31 March 2007) http://www.gurtong.org/ResourceCenter/weeklyupdates/wu_contents.asp?wkupdt_id=704&vswuOrder=Sorter_WuType&vswuDir=ASC&vswuPage=73
[2] 'Why do South Sudan have the worst telecommunications in the world?' *Sudan Mirror* (30 August 2007): http://www.sudanmirror.com/newsdetail.php?catid=5&subcat=439 .
[3] Interview Muhtadi (Mirjam).

wonderful world. In their explanations and justification it is supposed that the mobile phone will automatically contribute to development: relations between communication technologies and development are seen as intrinsically positive. The companies view their role in society as constructive and developmental in terms of social dialogue, economic climate, job opportunities, etc. They see these positive changes not only in euphoric terms, but also as revolutionary. One of the leading management staff of Zain referred to their role as 'a change in the culture of Sudan'.

Most companies have an elaborate corporate responsibility programme, involving many development projects mainly in the realm of health and education. In the case of our research, these development activities are indeed related to the new stress on corporate social responsibility and to the longstanding tradition of Islamic business and social work.

The optimism displayed in the discourse and in the activities of the companies is reinforced in development and policy-making circles. Here also, it is assumed that the 'digital divide' and the 'technology gap' are mere problems of access. Although in these circles there is more emphasis on the 'have-nots' (in a rather literal sense of the word), the problem is situated only in terms of access. The aim is to capacitate people (especially disadvantaged groups) so that they can afford these technologies and are no longer blocked from access. Here also, the relations between new ICT and development are automatically assumed.

In our findings we cannot but partly subscribe to the positive evaluations. People whom we interviewed pointed to the crucial importance of communication in their lives and many were happy with the possibilities that mobile telephony offered to them in this respect. Many Sudanese families have relatives abroad, not only due to the history of warfare in the country, but also due to migration labour, mainly to Saudi Arabia. In some cases family bonds are (re-)established through the mobile phone. Visits are no longer made in vain, as people can call on beforehand (reducing costs of transport), important family news (such as birth, marriage and death announcements) can be made within a second and family members who in the past could only rarely be in touch with their loved ones, can now be in contact regularly. People in business also testified to the advantages of mobile telephony. Their business arrangements can be organised with more efficiency, supplies can be ordered in a second, and in many sectors mobile telephone is the easiest way for customers to reach people offering services (such as taxi, henna painting, etc). On top, many people have found work to offer credit services, sell mobile phones and accessories and so new sources for income generation have come into existence. These advantages are by no means restricted to the rich and powerful in Sudan: many less well-to-do also have acquired a mobile phone and people from disadvantaged groups are strong about the benefits they have experienced: the mobile phone gives women more space to develop their own network, youngsters more possibilities to explore the world around them. Of course, the development projects initiated by the companies are appreciated by the recipients: people are happy if they are provided with an ambulance.

Below the surface, however, a different picture emerges. In new contexts, where the mobile phone has not yet or only shortly arrived, people indeed only stress their wish for acquisition: they want the network to arrive where they are, they want to have a mobile phone, they want to have air time. In contrast to this 'culture of aspiration', people in areas where the mobile phone has been present for some years, the views are far more balanced. In Khartoum, for example, where the mobile phone came in 1997 people talked about positive and negative consequences of the introduction of the mobile phone. The problem with the flipside of mobile telephony is that these negative consequences are far less visible. But people testified that there are cases of families running into financial difficulties because the costs for mobile phone use were too high. They told of mobile phone addiction, of the decreased respect for privacy, of their worries about the diminishing quality of social contact and the decrease of face-to-face interaction. People felt that with the mobile phone people could lie more easily, and many expressed worries about the clashing sexual morals of youth and parents, a source of tension severely aggravated by the coming of the mobile phone. The development activities were also regarded with suspicion: in how far are these mere self-promotion, people wondered.

With this we have not even mentioned the wider context of war: through the mobile phone warlords can also organise their activities more easily, and in Congo, with the involvement of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, the coltan war is being waged. Enormous amounts of money are made in the multinational business of mobile telephony: but these profits only benefit the

country and the people where the money is made to a very limited extent. The companies often use extremely aggressive and misleading campaigns to increase their sales and litter the landscape with enormous billboards and buildings painted in 'their' colour. The policies developed at a national scale, certainly in the case of Sudan, are often clearly related to corruption, self-enrichment and interests that have nothing to do with increasing good services for the citizens.

In other words, the positive discourse needs to be challenged and a more balanced evaluation should be offered. How can we as researchers meaningfully react to the culture of optimism displayed by the companies and the development agencies? What is our position if the research is funded by one such company? These questions stand on their own and need serious scrutiny.

On top, we need to ponder these issues in connections with our methodologies and results. We wish to state very clearly that hitherto we have been left free in our choices and there have been no restrictions on our research activities whatsoever. But what will happen after publishing? Will the companies be prepared to have a more critical assessment published? What if they, pe on their website, select the positive arguments and only publish these, leaving out the more negative statements?

b. Research and a mobile phone company
The remark about methodologies needs further scrutiny. As said, until now there have been no restrictions to our research activities.
All the same, our research has taken some directions that would not have been taken if there had not been this cooperation. In many ways, the people of company in Sudan have been extremely helpful in assisting the research: they arranged for some of the complex red tape in Sudan, booked a ticket to Juba, obtained a film permit, etc, etc.
But the company also in several instances provided us with a car and a driver. What does it mean to drive around in Sudan in a car with the logo of the company on the sides?
They also took us on a trip to El Fasher in Darfur, where the possibilities and risks of expanding the company's network in Darfur were discussed with the political leaders of the region. It would probably be overestimating the impact of our study to implicate that our presence was of any consequence for the negotiations, but the ethics even so remain. Is it appropriate to accompany a multinational business enterprise on its way to try and make money in an area where a genocide is taking place? Should we accept money from such a company at all?
But would it have been appropriate to accompany and receive money from a development agency? Zain is establishing connections in Darfur (yes with Janjaweed, yes with the central government) so as install a mobile telephone network. The development agencies and the diplomatic circles present in Sudan have no dialogue with these parties. The warlords and – leaders all already have access through expensive satellite connections, so that does not make much difference. Perhaps the mobile phone will indeed help families to trace members, to warn people of oncoming danger so that they can flee in time, and spread knowledge about what is happening in Darfur.

The international companies from the Middle East play an increasing role in the Sudanese context. They can be said to 'buy up' Sudan to some extent: ports, @ are acquired by such companies.

2. doing research in Sudan:
This brings us to the second aspect of the ethical issues related to our research. Perhaps the ethical problems we are discussing are not so strongly related to being funded by a private business company, but more to the political context of Sudan. The government of Sudan is being held responsible for what is happening in Darfur: this is widely reported in the international press. Less well known is that the government has also actively quelled protest against the construction of a dam in the North, right in one of the case-study areas for this research. The government policies to the south can be described as inciting a new war: the way in which regulations installed and negotiations stalled can be classified as outright provocations. The GOSS largely consists of corrupt former warlords who are not ready for their political and diplomatic tasks, and, on top, are not prepared to view the central government as anything else than an enemy. Our

research permits have been arranged through officials of both central government and GOSS. We have interviewed various representatives of both these bodies.

Should one carry out research about mobile telephony in a country where a genocide is taking place, a war is being created by the political leaders, and political protesters are being shot at? Will research about this subject contribute to a better understanding of what is happening in the country?