

Connections, Technology and Social Transformations

Africa is shaping connections in fascinating ways under intensified globalization and this is leading to important transformations in the social fabric of everyday life. The introduction and appropriation of technologies on which these connections are based are speeding up processes of global flows and closures, resulting in different forms and levels of transformations on various geographical and social scales. Understanding the interrelationships between the shaping of connections and disconnections, the underlying introduction of new technologies and the resulting social transformations in African societies will lead to new insights into the how, what and why of socio-cultural, political and economic processes in Africa. The research projects that are being developed under this theme will work in a comparative framework of 'Connections and Transformations'. A focus on the study of connections will also inform the group's methodologies that are required to be as flexible as the connections are.

Connections are seen in this research programme as simultaneously linking various geographical, time and social spaces. Connections are being made between individuals, social groups and institutions at different moments in varying configurations. In the shaping of connections we see a central role for technology. Combining changes at all these different levels of connections without isolating any single connection is a challenge for and will be innovative in the study of social realities as they occur, have occurred and continually evolve in contemporary Africa.

By technology we refer to communication, social and organizational technologies. These include industrial technology as well as the introduction of new organizational models (management) or new social forms, such as the organizational forms introduced by specific religions and ideologies, but also organizational forms introduced by policy measures and development. These technologies are as technical as they are social and, as such, they are interpreted, internalized and used in a social context where they become part of the context and thus of society. Technological innovations may lead to reconfigurations of social relations resulting in people connecting with new relations or introducing entirely new forms of organization. But they may also lead to disconnections, to the formation of enclaves and to social isolation.

The theory of connections is still in an initial stage of development. Given the centrality of connections as a concept, the theme group envisages exploring its theoretical and ontological dimensions with a view to developing a general theory of connections. In the light of the group's commitment to multidisciplinary and methodological flexibility, such a theory of connections should be informed by insights from different paradigms in the social sciences and humanities. The theory must, however, avoid the standard shortcomings of oversimplification and the tendency towards sterile dichotomies that fail to do justice to the interconnections of real life situations. The group plans to overcome such shortcomings by thinking and writing through connections between disciplines, and with researchers based on the African continent.

We understand connections as being analytically distinct from social relations in the sense that relations make use of, and are made possible by connections, while in their turn connections need certain social technologies to come into existence in a functional and meaningful way. By way of example; a railway line connecting different places allows for a range of (new) social relations to be established. This connection exists irrespective of these social relations, yet may be productive or transformative of them. For the railway-line to become established, a range of technologies is required, both technical in the 'hard' sense of the word as well as the kind of social technologies that relate to the management and organization of this connection.

While the connection thus becomes pivotal in the way (social) technologies come into play on the one hand as well as in the manner in which social relations are being shaped or refigured on the other hand, the nature of the connection itself is also part of the study in this programme. Africa has seen the rise of a plethora of new forms of connections in recent decades (new roads, railways, telephone, ICT, etc.) making it evident that many transformations of African societies result from these developments. Whereas we are only just beginning to understand the significance of what it means for societies if new connections are established, old connections change or disappear, or

certain things and places become disconnected, another point for study is the ‘materiality’ of connections. This programme will therefore also focus on the immaterial nature of certain connections and their transformative efficacy, such as connections that are established through religious and political ideologies, power and knowledge.

People have a reason to connect and to disconnect and they do so in meaningful ways. These are always informed by cultural and social repertoires that are available in the specific societies participating in the connections. These processes of change cannot be understood without analyzing people’s agency on the one hand, which focuses on individual and collective decisions, interpretations and reactions to the changes in their environment, nor without understanding the ways in which these interactions upon their social world come about. Individual and collective agency shows how people and institutions work together, react towards and impose upon each other through establishing various types of connections, and in the process form new social hierarchies, different (labour) relations and varied forms of cooperation, and new forms of mobility. These are created and based upon old as well as new repertoires of (dis)connection available to people.

Research domains

As promising fields of research in the complex interrelationship between (dis)connections, technology and social transformations, we propose mobility, religion and ideology, knowledge and social hierarchies. From the interrelationship between these fields of study, a set of questions can be formulated that inspire research.

In our research projects we have chosen to concentrate on certain forms of connecting that appear to be ‘new’ in a certain period of societal existence and the way this is related to the introduction of technologies and how it produces social transformations. We have also chosen to build upon our experiences so far by concentrating on areas where we have worked before and trying to incorporate our former research. The theme group will devote considerable time to developing a theory or approach of connections and social transformations; and will put energy into the development of methodology, i.e. the proposal to do team research.

Within the domains of research identified, a number of specific research projects will be defined. In addition to these, the group will work on epistemological and ontological questions related to the development of a ‘theory of connections’ and on methodological issues.

Sub-programmes

1. *Technologies of Mobility and Communication, New Dynamics in Spatial Relations in Africa and Beyond*

- Research projects:

- Mobile Africa Revisited: A Comparative Study of the Relationship between Mobility, Technologies and New Social Spaces (Mirjam de Bruijn, Inge Brinkman, Francis Nyamnjoh, Daniela de Lame, Lotte Pelckmans)
- Children, Youth and Mobility (Ria Reis, Rijk van Dijk, Mirjam de Bruijn)
- Tourist Encounters in Africa (Wouter van Beek)
- Mobility of Law (Gerti Hesselning)

2. *I.C.E. in Africa: The Relationship between People and the Internal Combustion Engine in Africa*

- Research projects

- Social History of the Motor Vehicle in Zambia (Jan-Bart Gewald);
- The Drive for Money: I.C.E. Technology and the Anthropological Aspects of Money Making in Truck Farming and Gold Mining in Rural Burkina Faso (Sabine Luning);
- The Impact of Motorized Transport on the Hajj from West Africa (Baz Lecocq);
- Social History of Tamale, an African Town in Ghana through the Lens of ICE-Technology (Ntewusu Aniegye).

3. Ideological Technologies of Connection: Religious Linkages in the Transformation of African Societies

- Research networks:

- Reconfiguring the Religion-HIV/AIDS Connection: Challenges and Opportunities
- Markets of Morality in Southern Africa; Exploring New Connections of Religion and Entrepreneurship

- Research projects:

- Nuptial Connections: Pentecostalism, Marriage and Reproduction in Botswana in Times of Crisis (Rijk van Dijk)
- The Divine Mission of Nature Business (Marja Spierenburg, Harry Wels)
- Religion Local and Global (Wouter van Beek)
- Women, Religion and Collective Identities in African Communities in Europe (Mayke Kaag)
- Brazilian Pentecostal Churches and their Cultural Politics in Maputo, Mozambique (Linda van de Kamp)

4. Connections in African Knowledge (Under Construction)

- Research projects

- The Production of Africanist Global Academic Knowledge for a Modern African Environment? The Case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Julie Ndaya)
- African Oral Literatures, New Media, and Technologies: Challenges for Research and Documentation (Daniela Merolla)

Methodology

The theme group plans to pay particular attention to the development of research techniques and to engage in some team research. This is meant as a methodological experiment that would help formulate methodologies, develop interdisciplinarity and provide insights into one specific research topic showing the relationship between transformation, technologies and connections.

The regional distribution of studies is as follows:

Southern Africa (Zambia, Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique); West Africa (Mali, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Senegal), Central Africa (Chad, Uganda).