

During the **ECAS** (European Conference for African Studies) conference, Leiden, 11-14 July 2007, Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh and Inge Brinkman organised a panel for this conference, with the title:

'New Social Spaces. Mobility and technology in Africa'.

For the paper presented by Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman, view the document 'ECAS article Khartoum website'. The papers presented during the panel will be edited as a book (forthcoming 2009).

CALL FOR PAPERS for the panel:

New Social Spaces. Mobility and technology in Africa

Dr. Mirjam de Bruijn (ASC, Bruijnm@ascleiden.nl); **Dr. Francis Nyamnjoh** (CODESRIA, Nyamnjoh@yahoo.com) ; **Dr. Inge Brinkman** (ASC, Ibrinkman@ascleiden.nl)

In this panel we propose to investigate the relations between mobility, communication technologies and social space. Although not exclusively we invite panelists to concentrate on New Information and Communication Technologies and especially the cell phone. Mobility is one of the important features of economic and social styles of the African continent, often related to economic and social parameters. Through migration and mobility, people create societies that do not consist so much of a community living in one geographical place, but rather of multiple communities that are formed by strings of people. Some of these shifting communities are seen as 'marginal' vis-à-vis the state, we propose to call these 'mobile margins'.

While marginal regions and the migrant communities attached to them are often associated with isolation, for people from these areas, communication is often central in their lives. Patterns of mobility and contact are strongly related to technology or the absence of it: new means of communication open up new alleys of contact, while closing off other routes and means of interaction. Not only new forms of mobility, but also these recent technological innovations, especially the cell-phone, need to be framed in a historical perspective that includes earlier changes in communication and technology. In this manner it becomes possible to study marginalization as a differentiated and varied process.

In the panel specific attention is given to:

- the relations between the introduction of new communication technologies, and social and political hierarchies in 'marginalized areas' and the migrant communities that have been and are produced from these regions.

- the changing meaning of marginality in a context of social change related to communication technologies. How do people from marginal communities link their history to notions of centrality and marginality, of contact and isolation or of exclusion and connection? And how are these related to the formation of mobile margins of various geographical outreaches?

PROGRAMME of panel

‘New social spaces: mobility and communication technology in Africa’

Convenors : Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh, Inge Brinkman

Time: Friday July 13, 2007, 9.30 am – 17.00 pm

Place: Chalet 13, Pieter de la Court building, University Leiden

Morning session chair: Mirjam de Bruijn

Afternoon session chair: Inge Brinkman

Discussants: Martin de Koning (Celtel); Bart Barendregt (CA Leiden); Inge Brinkman (ASC Leiden), Mirjam de Bruijn (ASC Leiden)

9.30: Opening (by the convenors),
Short introduction by Martin de Koning (Celtel)

10.00-10.15 Context and concepts
Introduction to the theme (Inge Brinkman)

10.15-11.15: History and fieldwork
Walter Gam Nkwi: "The History of Communication and Technology in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon"
Lotte Pelckmans: "Changes in fieldwork because of the mobile phone" (Mali)
(Discussant: Inge Brinkman & Bart Barendregt)

Short coffee/tea break

11.30-13.00: Translocality, economy and mobile phones
Julia Pfaff: " 'Mobile networks': mobile phones, trade and translocality among young 'Swahili' traders" (Tanzania)
Thomas S.J Molony: "Trading Places in Tanzania: The importance of mobility in a time of travel-saving technologies"
Saibou Issa: "Techniques of communication, highway banditry and repression of banditry in North-Cameroon : between tradition and modernity"
(Discussant: Martin de Koning)

13.00-14.00: lunch

14.00-15.00: Social landscape and the mobile phone
Kibora Ludovic: "Mobile phone: The assimilation of the SMS by orality society" (Burkina Faso)
Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh, Walter Gam Nkwi: "Phone culture in Cameroon"
(Discussant: Thomas Molony)

short coffee/tea break

15.15-16.15: Diaspora and ICT : changing networks

Irene Naluwembe Binasi: "Click me / text me / flash me: re-shaping transnational realities in diasporic space" (Uganda)
Jenna R. Burrell: "Technology and Territorial Claims among Ghanaians at Home and Abroad"

ABSTRACTS of the papers presented during the panel

'Mobile networks': mobile phones, trade and translocality among young 'Swahili' traders

Julia Pfaff (julia.pfaff@uni-bayreuth.de)

Abstract:

In this paper I want to investigate the relations between mobility, communication technologies and social space by analysing the 'mobile networks' and flows of translocal trading practices through Dar es Salaam. Examining the socio-spatial processes by which actors and their networks forge and sustain translocal connections and translocalities, this study concentrates on recent trading initiatives of young 'Swahili'. Regarding the so-called 'Swahili corridor' as a 'mobile margin' it will be highlighted how recent technological innovations and new opportunities and notions of mobility facilitate, revive and (re)create long-standing translocal connections in socio-cultural as well as in economic terms. Mobile phones are a primary material form of these trading connections, both as objects of exchange and as technologies of communication. Based in part on mobile ethnographic research with a small number of traders dealing in and with the help of mobile phones, the paper presents an insight into the everyday experiences, mobile practices and the performativity of trading and networking. By doing so, this paper resonates and contributes to current debates on mobility, translocal (commercial) spaces, object geographies, as well as on the role of ICT in trading practices in Africa. Moreover, investigating the interconnections between mobile traders and mobile phones shows how these goods and notions of mobility interrelate with the traders' identities and social statuses. Finally, this can be linked to ways in which young 'Swahili' deal with their 'marginality' and how they find their way in or even out of a 'mobile margin'.

Mobile phone: The assimilation of the SMS by orality society

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Abstract:

Located in West Africa, Burkina Faso is a sahelian country of 12,000,000 inhabitants. The population comprises about sixty (60) ethnical groups which traditionally base on the oral tradition to communicate. Even being one of the less developed countries in the world, the introduction of the mobile phone use in the late 1990s in Burkina Faso, surprisingly enticed the populations for this new technology Burkina Faso is a landlocked farming country. About 80% of the population is living in the rural areas. However, initiatives have been locally developed by the users for the possession and the use of the mobile, adapting it to the social, cultural and economic realities of the country.

The urban areas early benefited from the coverage of the mobile phone network. The local populations very often identify hills, trees, rocks or any other elevated system, from the top of which, they can transmit or receive their calls. According to statistics issued in 2006 by the ministry of the economy and development about 42% of the population in BF are living in absolute poverty with less than one U.S \$ a day, but in less than a decade, the use of the mobile phone the poor peasants widely exceeded the use of the traditional phone which is operative since the political independence of the country in 1960. The three mobile phone operators, which are Telmob, Celtel, and Telecel companies have set up since 2002, a system to send short written messages called SMS. This new system of communication has also been very easily assimilated by the populations regardless their age or socio-professional activities. The use of the Short Message System is an evidence of the populations in the "country of upright people" to pragmatically adapt their needs to the realities of the moment. However, the enticement of the populations for a technology of communication which is based on handwriting is quite amazing in a country which nationwide educational attendance rate is about 45% and the literacy rate, about 25%. The low cost to transmit messages, the spelling mistakes unconsidered etc. are some of the elements which allow understanding the importance of the SMS use in Burkina Faso. We'll try to explain through personal experience and through what has been written on the subject, how it has been possible for populations of a different culture, who until now have developed other means to communicate, to make their own, this system of modern communication that has come from abroad.

Click me / text me / flash me: re-shaping transnational realities in diasporic space

Irene Naluwembe Binaisa (inb20@sussex.ac.uk)

Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore transnational practices amongst the Ugandan 'diaspora' with a focus on the Internet and mobile communication technologies as a key site of expression in today's world. The proliferation of new forms of communication technologies and the lowering of their cost base has increased access across social economic classes as well as infrastructure challenged parts of the world, such as in Africa. The pervasive reach of these new communication technologies is one factor that has brought migrant relationships into the spotlight. What were once discreet bounded communities are in some respects accessible to 'outsiders' through a click of a mouse button. Migrants from Uganda although not the biggest group from the African continent are characterised by the diversity of the 'community's' composition and range of trajectories. Small pre-independence migration flows led by elite cadres of students were swelled by the refugee flows of the 70s and 80s. The mid 80s onwards gave way to more diverse flows, which encompassed asylum seekers, economic migrants, undocumented migrants, students and family re-unification, responding to changing migration regime patterns and opportunities.

This paper will examine how these migrants and their descendants continually subvert classifications based on the modern nation state such as: country of origin - Uganda, continent – Africa, country of domicile – UK, USA, Norway etc; category – migrant, refugee, citizen, etc – markers and boundaries based on this model. Whilst simultaneously embracing new technologies that give access to shifting positionalities, engendering transnational space and re-shaping border realities. In following these traces, networks and paths terms such as 'community' are inscribed, abandoned, re-inscribed across this diasporic space constantly in the making. The fluidity and boundary crossing abilities of these technologies utilised to engage, trade, exchange and interact not only with people, but with goods, services, news, cultural artefacts to name but some examples.

Taking a multi-sited ethnographic approach the fieldwork informing this paper has been undertaken whilst territorially based in the UK and to a limited extent in Uganda. Internet based research has encompassed a wide range of phenomena including websites, newsgroups, 'cultural' sites, magazine sites, blogs, etc. I have also incorporated data and links gathered from personal narratives of Ugandan migrants and their descendants. What emerges is a complex nuanced picture as to how migrants and their descendants engage within and across space in transnational practices, what can be termed transnational realities, and their impact on 'identity', 'community', and 'belonging'.

Technologies of mobility and the negotiation of belonging in Cameroon

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the fascinating appropriation of and changing communication dynamics engineered by information and communication technologies (ICTs) among Cameroonians in a context of flexible mobility. This it does by discussing the experiences and discourses of Anglophone Cameroonians both in their home villages and as migrants in diasporic spaces within and abroad. Empirical substantiation is provided by interviews with and personal experiences of Anglophone Cameroonians at home and abroad collected through face-to-face and electronic interactions thanks to flexibility mobility. The paper examines the relationship between innovations in communication technologies and the negotiation of mobility and encounters with new social spaces. It argues that ICTs have shaped and been shaped in turn by the personal and collective agency of the individuals and cultural communities who have embraced or been embraced by them. In addition to the different translocal and transnational mobility possibilities offered

Cameroonians by ICTS, the latter have also served to redefine relationships, community and belonging in ways both acceptable and contested. The paper thus provides evidence on how flexible mobility and advances in ICTs have transformed understanding of family, relationships, intimacy and ideas of home and belonging. Individuals and communities from Anglophone Cameroon are using ICTs to outgrow bounded ideas of home, and also to domesticate the opportunities that come with flexible mobility and new dimensions of being and belonging. With modern technologies such as the plane, radio, television, Internet and cellphone, local cultural values are being globalised as families and communities forage for opportunities in diasporic spaces through their sons and daughters as translocal and transnational migrants, while at the same time multiplying opportunities for accountability and, quite paradoxically, opportunism as well. Such accessibility, flexible mobility and flexible cultural discourses have also engendered flexible ideas of relationships of intimacy. Thanks to ICTs local cultural values are able to cross boundaries and stretch the borders of intimacy with opportunities and opportunism informed by consumerism, especially as experienced at the margins of belonging and success. With these possibilities, home appears less confined by borders, as bounded ideas of being and belonging are tinkered with constantly by desperate individuals in tune with the infinite possibilities of these technologies.

Negotiating mobility's through mobile technology

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Abstract:

This paper explains how the impetus of mobile technology in Malian society is creating new forms of both geographical and social mobility. New mobility's and connections are being established and are explained by various actors. The mobile phone has a different importance for the urban intellectual elite and rural youth, including seasonal migrants in cities. Access to this mobile technology is related to certain power plays and claims that (re-)create new processes of in- and exclusion.

Technology and Territorial Claims among Ghanaians at Home and Abroad

Jenna R. Burrell (j.r.burrell@lse.ac.uk)

Abstract:

This paper brings together research on communication technology use among Ghanaian transnationals in London and among Internet café users in Accra, Ghana. In both settings technology was used to address marginality and to make claims on physical and symbolic territory in a challenge for more central positioning. These technology adopters often confronted multiple forms of marginality in their everyday lives. While Internet users in Accra, as citizens of an African nation, faced the marginality of their disadvantageous position in the existing world order, transnational Ghanaians living in London dealt with a society that was often indifferent or hostile towards their presence. Furthermore, Internet users in Accra who were dominantly young and often still in school were marginally positioned in a society still in many ways ordered on gerontocratic principles. For youth, the consumption of illicit media from the Internet – ranging from American rap and hip-hop videos to pornography – served as a technique for contravening authority. The transfer of illicit imagery from the Internet café to the classroom or dormitory was one example of attempts to expand territorial claims via technology. Communication technologies were also viewed as paralleling and amplifying the territorial claims of migration by affording instantaneous, low-cost, unregulated access to distant locales. The Internet in particular was viewed both by Ghanaian transnationals in London and Internet café users in Accra as a powerful tool for making foreign contacts, building social capital, and potentially facilitating new migration opportunities.

The Internet, among other communication technologies, facilitated attempts to annex territory. However, the technologies themselves were also a symbolic territory to claim. Technological competence was thought to generate both social and physical mobility. Furthermore, the space of the Internet café was a physical territory that was also claimed and remade. The spatial metaphors employed in relation to these technologies allude unapologetically (and sometimes with subversive knowing) to images from a right-wing discourse in Britain that depicts migration as invasion, as an illegitimate claim on territory. At the same time, through these activities technology users encountered a tension between the desire to

reterritorialize technology into a local vernacular and the appeal of the foreignness of technology and the possibility of being transformed in its image.

The History of Communication and Technology in the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the history of communication and technology in the Bamenda Grass fields of Cameroon. The introduction of new communication technologies like the cell phones, has created mobile margins, and the historical dynamics of social hierarchies. All these call for enquiry in the sub-region. This is more compelling because the mobile phone is well integrated in the Bamenda Grass fields of Cameroon. Despite this integration, little or no scholarship has taken it seriously. This paper will therefore hinged on how communication technology shape relations between different communities of the Bamenda Grassfields and has also changed feelings of anxiety-perceptions and ideas over time and space. It will further delineate how cell phone technology and Internet Cyber cafes has defined and redefined culture and relations amongst the people of the Grass fields. The approach adopted here will be interdisciplinary although an historical dimension will be uppermost.

Trading Places in Tanzania: The importance of mobility in a time of travel-saving technologies

Thomas SJ Molony (Thomas.Molony@ed.ac.uk)

Abstract:

Information and communication technologies, and especially mobile phones, are frequently heralded a saviour for poor Africans. One of the most common examples given for how these technologies are being used to alleviate poverty in Africa is of rural farmers accessing wholesale market prices to circumvent the evil middleman. Many such accounts are anecdotal or are based on reports of unsustainable donor projects that fail to represent the typical situation many information and communication technology (ICT) users find themselves in. While recent research does recognise that the ways in which ICT can help increase information about the availability and price of goods are much more complex than the rather naïve suggestions that it enables producers to 'bypass intermediaries, there is no analysis of these crucial complexities and how they affect socio-economic interaction.

Using as a case study the domestic trade of perishable foodstuffs between the Southern Highlands of Tanzania and Dar es Salaam, the paper shows how "parasitic" middlemen can play a crucial role in these markets. Emphasis is given to the centrality of mobility in dealings between wholesale buyers in the Dar es Salaam municipal market and producers in rural isolated communities, and it is suggested that ICT alone are not always sufficient in sustaining a working relationship between the farmer and his urban buyer. For some of the most successful and respected wholesale buyers the interactions with their rural suppliers are as much social as they are economic. These interactions rely on face-to-face communication that apparently cannot be substituted by distance technologies such as mobile phones. The evidence is based on semi-structured interviews conducted throughout 2003 with 15 tomato and potato farmers, 4 intermediary traders, 5 Dar es Salaam-based wholesale buyers and various other key informants involved in the trade. It highlights the contested meaning of "mobility", and questions whether established relations between marginal farmers and their urban buyers that are previously based on face-to-face communication really are being damaged by information and communication technologies. While mobile phones do open up some useful new alleys of contact, they do not always close off other routes and means of interaction and as some players choose to maintain their old, pre-ICT methods of interaction. In this context the paper shows how some on the "mobile margins" who are assumed to benefit drastically from new information and technologies are embedded in particular systems of power that are more complex than many in the pro-ICT community realise.

Marginality as a mode of participation. Young Fulbe-Wodaabe on the world stage

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Abstract:

The Fulbe-Wodaabe, nomadic cattle breeders from Central Niger living at the edge of the desert, can be considered as a marginal community in the sense that their participation in the social developments of colonial and post-colonial Niger remained very limited. Since the 1980s however the Wodaabe show a remarkable proclivity for new forms of mobility, e.g. seasonal urban migration, and new forms of interaction and exchange. Important protagonists in these mobility processes are young Wodaabe, especially young men. The proposed contribution will not so much deal with new communication technologies, although these play an ever growing role among Wodaabe as well. Rather, it centers on a category of social actors who themselves have become media of exchange with the outer world, namely on the young Wodaabe men and their cultural modes of expression, especially their spectacular "body art" and group dances. These performances which were originally directed to an exclusively Wodaabe audience attract nowadays photographers, camera teams and tourists and represent an important factor for migration to urban centres and to Europe. The contribution will focus on the fact that these exchanges, while being based on marginality, i.e. on notions of social and cultural particularism and reserve, promote universalism and global participation.

Techniques of communication, highway banditry and repression of banditry in North-Cameroon: between tradition and modernity

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Abstract:

The ambush on the highway, the raids of cattle or the raid on insulated campings that the highway robbers perpetrate, are military operations. As it is the case with the regular armies, whether they are traditional or modern, the gangsters deploy consequent techniques of communication to follow the movements of their next victims, to give orders to the various links of the band or to order the withdrawal after the operations. This study examines change and continuity of the means and the forms of collection of information flow on the arenas of the rural banditry from the colonial period to nowadays. Firstly, there will be an analytical inventory of the networks and types of information on which the armed bandits rely to plan and carry out their attacks and to protect themselves against surprise retaliation. In addition, we will see the role of the changes of the means of communication on the qualitative evolution of gangsters' operations and on the effectiveness of the techniques of repression both through popular defence and the action of the forces of law and order. The imitation of birds' songs, the use whistles, the recourse to messengers, the rural telephony and the command radios coverage, and the introduction of the mobile phone, are the main techniques and technologies of communication whose use by gangsters and anti-bandits units will be studied. A particular attention will be paid to the use of ultramodern technologies such as satellite telephones or Thuraya mobile phones by the illiterate stockbreeders such as the Mbororo pastoralists, who are frequently victims of aggression.

Key words: Banditism – intelligence – communication – telephone - Mbororo