

We presented our research proposal during a workshop, entitled: 'Innovation, connections and order', held in Thurnau (Germany), 12-13 June 2008.

The prime aim of the workshop was to establish lines of cooperation between the African Studies Centre and the University of Bayreuth, as researchers from both institutes are interested in technologies and connections.

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Title

Mobile Africa Revisited: A comparative study of the relationship between new communication technologies and social spaces (Chad, Mali, Cameroon, Angola)

Paper outline

In this paper we would like to present the plans for a research programme that has been accepted and for which we have started preparing. The programme title is: *Mobile Africa Revisited: A comparative study of the relationship between new communication technologies and social spaces (Chad, Mali, Cameroon, Angola)*.

In the programme we focus on the relations between mobile phones, mobility and social hierarchies. The case-studies will be carried out in so-called marginal areas, in which many inhabitants view themselves as being excluded from mainstream economic, political and social life. Mobility often constitutes a crucial element in the lives of people from these areas and instead of viewing their societies in terms of geographical space, it may be more fruitful to think in terms of strings of people forming a 'mobile margin'. Communication within these networks can be vital for its participants and the impact and the social use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), notably the mobile phone, may be most dramatic among 'marginal' social categories and in 'marginalized' areas. Despite the 'technological gap' and the 'digital divide', the use of new ICT – the Internet and mobile telephony in particular – in Africa has accelerated remarkably since their introduction in the late 1990s. This trend is noted for urban areas in Africa, but especially the mobile phone is also spreading fast in rural areas.¹

The programme aims to study the extent to which the recent introduction of new ICTs in these areas is shaping and is shaped by such mobile margins, both socially and economically. We stress the notion of appropriation in the relation between people and technology: instead of an exclusive focus on the impact of technology on society, we are also interested in the creative uses to which technologies are put. This notion of mutual influence already makes clear that we strongly argue against the thesis of technological determinism that presumes a causal relationship between technology and society. The existing literature on new ICT often posits these in a historical vacuum. It is our conviction that studying earlier technological innovations, like writing, motorized transport, bicycles, telegraphy, fixed telephone lines, radio and television, can shed light on the processes of appropriation and the impact of ICT, such as the Internet and the mobile phone.

Especially in development circles, there exists a tendency to view the introduction of new ICT as unequivocally positive. Instead of making this assumption, we would like to study the processes involved first. Perhaps alternative alleys of contact are being opened up but it is also possible that earlier routes and forms of interaction are being closed off or redefined. New ICTs may be leading to unforeseen

¹ The number of mobile-phone subscribers in 2001 had already passed landline connections and reached 137 million subscribers in 2005 (only a decade after mobile phones were first introduction). Growth rates in African countries are among the fastest of the world, reaching 65% in some areas (Scott 2004, RNCOS report 'African Mobile Market Forecast (2007-2011)').

opportunities but could also generate new patterns of exclusion and poverty and lead to new social hierarchies. New ICTs are perhaps being used and articulated in creative, locally embedded ways, but it could equally be possible that people in mobile marginal networks feel that the new ICTs and the international companies introducing them are being aggressively imposed on them, leading to new social, moral and economic problems.

Questions

In the research plan we propose the following main research questions:

- ❖ How are new ICTs, notably the mobile phone, (re)shaping social/economic relations between people *in* and *from* the 'mobile margins'?
- ❖ How do people in these margins interpret and evaluate the impact of ICTs in view of their histories of centrality/marginality, contact/isolation, inclusion/exclusion?
- ❖ How and to what extent do Africans in marginal communities on the one hand and within marginal social categories on the other socially shape ICTs?
- ❖ What are the social and political dynamics at play and the roles of companies in social policy and local politics following the advent of ICT industries?
- ❖ What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of mobile margins in and from Africa on the introduction and appropriation of ICTs, towards informing scholarship and policy on development, poverty alleviation, citizenship and global relations?

Methods

In the methods for this programme, the traditional space-bound fieldwork should be reconsidered. For these projects, the methodology requires flexibility: it should focus on strings of people rather than geographical spaces. 'Marginal communities' and their worldwide diasporic connections will be part of the research. Mobility, or real and virtual presence and absence, must dictate research methods in which the ICTs studied play a central role. Doing surveys, tracing people for interviewing (face-to-face or via email and mobile phone) and studying documents in written, audio and electronic archives in various places (as opposed to being located in particular geographical spaces for fieldwork in the conventional sense) may not only lead to interesting new findings but also provide new and potentially enriching methodological alleys to explore. While there is some information about the methodological implications of family histories and social network analysis, we look forward to combining these insights with current explorations in the field of migrant cultures and transnational studies. We intend to draw on source material on how new ICTs such as the mobile phone and email messaging may transgress the traditional divisions of oral sources and written documents, and suggest new methodologies for interpreting virtual sources.

Case-studies

In the paper we hope to introduce two very different case-studies, both in the Angolan context. These are the case study envisaged in Northern Angola (*Political identities, social hierarchies and the history of communication technologies in northern Angola*) and a case-study in south-east Angola: *Losing the peace? The post-war history of south-east Angola and the introduction of new communication technologies*.

Case-Studies:

1. *Communication technologies, politics and mobility in the Bamenda Grassfields and amongst Bamenda Grassfielders in the South West Province of Cameroon and in the diaspora*

In this marginal Anglophone region of Cameroon where the state is perceived to be Francophone-dominated, the history of ICTs is closely linked to the perception and articulation by Anglophones (largely originating from the Bamenda Grassfields) of political, cultural and economic marginality. In this project, transformations in the mobile margins arising in relation to ICTs with their significant transnational character are linked to the construction of political, socio-economic and cultural identities and the articulation of politico-social aspirations. ICTs are explored as vehicles for physical and social mobility away from marginality and also for staying in touch with the place called 'home' in the interests of negotiated social change. The study thus seeks to understand how the people of this region have increasingly discovered and struggled for recognition, representation and social transformation through the possibilities offered them by new information and communication technologies. Initially the lorry made it possible for them to discover the marvels and dangers of colonial plantation agriculture in the coastal region and from this came the tensions and attractions of feeling at home away from home. With better roads and increased mobility such places became less mysterious, more visible and real as predatory sites of accumulation where migrants slaved away relentlessly. Still more technological advances (planned, television, the Internet and mobile phones) are taking people from the region further afield into distant lands and virtual spaces as families and communities sacrifice sons and daughters to seek opportunities in Africa, Europe, North America and elsewhere. The interaction between migratory trends and stay-at-home communities appears to be giving rise to a whole new social landscape, but not always of a positive nature. As evident from complaints by diasporic Cameroonians, the expectations of modernity through the consumption of foreign goods have engendered highly mercantilist attitudes by kin and acquaintances determined to treat those in the diaspora essentially as disposable 'wallets on legs'. In this study, the economic, political, social and cultural implications of all these encounters with and negotiation of ICT are central. The study will specifically focus on political changes, ideas of citizenship and belonging and relate these to the different forms of elite formation that go with these processes.

2. *Nomadic cultures in the era of new ICTs: the transformation of nomadic social hierarchies in Mali and beyond*

Nomadic peoples have a specific history of marginalization that fits well into the concept of mobile margins as livelihoods are typically gained on the move in accordance with their economy, ecology and histories of mobility. Politically the nomads of Mali – the Tuareg and Fulani – have not played an important role in the modern state as the Malian state is dominated by the non-nomadic South. The northern regions have been victims of drought and armed conflict, which have led to a large part of the population moving to southern Mali, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. The recent conflict in Cote d'Ivoire has clearly shown the difficult position these migrants find themselves in, as 'strangers' who are regarded as intruders in their new 'homes'.

Sahelian societies are at least partly characterized by specific inequalities in which the organization of labour along the lines of dependency is still dominant. This characteristic also continues to inform Malian nomadic groups: nobility, pastoralists and slaves display their own mobility histories and ways of perceiving marginality. While the elites form mobile margins between urban spaces, pastoralist patterns of mobility by and large form links between rural spaces.

The regions where these cultures are 'rooted' in the Sahel have a history of technological backwardness. Roads were developed here only in the late 1980s and telephone lines arrived in the late 1990s. Only very recently were these areas

connected through mobile technology. The elites of the nomads who live in urban spaces have easily adopted this new technology. The nomadic pastoralists who live in areas where the coverage of ICTs is very limited are nevertheless being introduced to a technology that will change their interpretations of social space and marginality in a profound way. This study will start from the core areas in central Mali (Gourma which is Tuareg country and Douentza/Hombori which is Fulani country) but will extend also into Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. The aim is to study the different ways elites and nomads have appropriated these technologies, thus linking the programme to questions of democracy and decentralization. Mali remains relatively peaceful and democratic but is still one of the poorest countries in Africa. However with the advent of decentralization and the introduction of TV and other communication technologies, the nomads have been introduced to and are appropriating aspects of modernity. How is their marginality perceived and how do they perceive it themselves in this new era? What are the differences with other cultural groups who are seen as occupying the political centre?

3. Political identities, social hierarchies and the history of communication technologies in northern Angola

The kingdom of Kongo was once the centre of commerce and diplomatic relations in West-Central Africa. However as of the 17th century, decline set in and upon colonialism the area became divided. The old heartland of the kingdom became a border region of Angola, a country strongly dominated by its capital Luanda. In social, political and economic terms, northern Angola became a marginalized region within the Angola context.

Despite this relative political and economic insignificance, strong elite formation continued throughout the colonial epoch, mainly under the influence of British Baptist missionaries. This missionary influence also contributed to the development of a strong emphasis on literacy in the region and written correspondence became very important for the Northern nationalist movement that operated from Congo/Zaire and fought the Portuguese colonial regime in the 1960s and 1970s. During the war over half a million people fled northern Angola, mostly to Congo/Zaire, and these communities tried to remain in contact with guerrillas and civilians still in northern Angola through letters and messages.

After independence, the Northern nationalist movement was unsuccessful in securing a place in the Angolan political and military theatre, and northern Angola became even more marginalized than before. Although local perceptions about the links between literacy and elite formation did not diminish, the area itself was impoverished, lacking facilities for health and schooling, and was rendered politically and economically insignificant.

The spread of the mobile phone into northern Angola in 2004 has led to questions about transformations in the realm of social hierarchies, orality and literacy. What has been the influence of the spread of ICTs on the historical role of literacy and literate elite formation in northern Angola? Are new elites, perhaps illiterate in the usual meaning but familiar with technologies such as the mobile phone and thus in a sense technologically literate, formed in the process of ICT expansion? Is the use of these modern devices such as the mobile phone regarded as a means of (re-)establishing northern Angola as an economically and politically vital area, as a way of reasserting Kongo identity and the northern provinces in the national context? These questions are particularly relevant in a post-civil-war situation and in a nationwide context of oil and diamond wealth that is strongly influencing patterns of political power and economic change. The redistribution of Angola's wealth and access to modern technologies may be widely regarded as a test of the government's promise of political transparency and increased economic equality.

4. Losing the peace? The post-war history of south-east Angola and the introduction of new communication technologies

The myth of five centuries of Portuguese presence in Angola certainly does not hold true for the south-east of the country. In this sparsely populated region, known in Portuguese as 'the lands at the end of the earth', colonial rule barely succeeded colonial conquest and the area remained ecologically, politically and economically marginal to the colony. Many inhabitants moved to South Africa, South West Africa (later Namibia), Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) in search of labour and cash. Apart from these long-distance forms of migration, the area is also characterized by a high degree of internal mobility.

These historical patterns of mobility in Angola were disrupted when war started in the 1960s. With brief intervals, the area was on the battlefield of first the nationalists and then the civil war from 1966 until 2002. In the wake of extreme violence and deprivation, people tried to flee to the small regional towns, to the capital Luanda and across the border into Zambia and Namibia.

Since the Angolan peace treaty was signed in 2002, a number of international development organizations have been coordinating the return of refugees and IDPs to south-east Angola. How do the returnees view the possibilities of the new communication technologies? Do they see them as assisting their own 'development' or do they view them as being largely outside their reach and related only to the realm of development agencies? Are the new ICTs playing a role in these newly created communities and in the reconfiguration of the mobile margins that connect south-east Angola to a range of other territories?

5. Disconnecting the margins? Conflict mobilities and the introduction of ICTs in Central Chad

Central Chad is a region that for various reasons can be defined as extremely marginal: outsiders consider the area as economically deprived; droughts and the war have exacerbated conditions in an already impoverished region. During the long civil war (1965-1990), people from this part of Chad played a central role as soldiers or rebels but they never attained a significant presence in any of the successive governments. On the contrary, they have always been on the margins of political life (de Bruijn & van Dijk 2007). This marginality has in itself made this zone into one of migration, and the mobility of the population has always been very high and dates in fact from ancient times. Of old, Central Chad's population moved to the east, and large communities of central Chadians were formed in Khartoum and in diverse rural areas of Sudan where they worked as labourers in mechanized agriculture. The civil war ended this migration pattern and shaped new forms of migration – people became IDPs and refugees – fleeing to the capital city N'djaména and further into Cameroon and Nigeria. In both countries there are large communities of Chadians. The recent economic boom in the south of Chad as a consequence of the exploitation of oil has again encouraged people from central Chad to try their luck in the south. This time it has been young men and women who left the area. Thus various mobile margins are formed, and new social spaces created. These new social spaces, partly brought about by war, drought and by the new resource of oil, have shaped oppositions and spaces of contestation.

Chad, even more than its neighbours, is almost completely lacking in adequate communication technologies: no tarmac roads and little motorized transport were present until the 1990s, and it is still very poorly served in this regard.

The introduction of the mobile phone in 2006 in Central Chad is therefore expected to produce quite revolutionary effects. In this study we will investigate the mobile margins that originated from Central Chad; their different social composition and the social spaces as these are recreated by ICTs. It will also consider how the marginality of Central Chad has been affected as the new ICTs force people to redefine their position and to link up with other communities. How are ideas about

marginality and mobility shaped and reformulated with the advent of the new ICTs? The case of Chad is particularly striking as technological and economic change, in part owing to its oil resources, reshapes populations recovering from civil war while at the same time encountering dramatic shifts in their historic situation where communication in general was notoriously difficult.