



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

***Summary of the research programme***

This research programme investigates the relationship between the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), social space, mobility and marginality in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although transport facilities and communication infrastructure are frequently deficient in the so-called remote and marginal regions of Africa, these regions usually have long histories of translocal mobility and migration. As a result of this combination of remoteness and mobility, the impact and the social use of new ICTs may be most dramatic among marginal social categories and in marginalized areas. Relations between people living in these areas and those who have moved away can be studied as strings of people forming mobile margins, with changing aspirations and possibilities. This project aims to study the extent to which the recent introduction of new ICTs in these areas is shaping and is shaped by the mobile margins, both socially and economically. Alternative alleys of contact are perhaps 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 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. The research programme therefore aims to interrogate the unequivocally positive view regarding the introduction of ICTs that is often found in policy circles.

This interdisciplinary research (History, Anthropology, Communication Technology, Media Studies, Geography, and Development Studies) will be carried out on a comparative basis in several marginal areas among physically and virtually marginal communities in Chad, Mali, Cameroon and Angola. The project also plans to establish a link between different scholarly and research institutions, local and international development agencies and companies concerned with the introduction and use of ICTs in Africa. The project will result in academic publications (PhD theses, edited books, articles and films) but will also produce reports and policy documents to encourage intensive discussion and a reassessment of the role of ICTs in development in Africa on local, national and international platforms.

***Description of the programme***

**Rationale and background**

In Africa, the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – the Internet and mobile telephony in particular – have accelerated remarkably since their introduction in the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> In terms of research, much remains unknown about the social transformations being

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<sup>1</sup> 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)').



occasioned by these developments, the processes of local appropriation of new ICTs and the ways in which new ICTs relate to older forms of communication technology. Technological advances are opening up new theoretical and methodological spaces for multidisciplinary research. Given the continent's relatively poor transportation and communications infrastructure, Africa is perhaps the best place to investigate the impact and social shaping of ICT. Also, Africans are physically and socially mobile and, historically, new communication technologies have affected such mobility in instructive ways. In general, easy communication provides new opportunities for mobility and renegotiating social relations and spaces, while at the same time involving new risks and increased inequalities. What forms these processes and transformations take in marginal Africa are worth studying in the interests of social science and policy making.

In various parts of Africa, mobility and being mobile are linked – though not confined – to feelings of marginality and remoteness. This reality has informed debate, policy and practice on development and poverty. In relation to the ICT revolution, discussion is often about the digital divide and how it accounts for Africa's marginality. The explosion of the Internet and mobile telephony is portrayed as a straightforward economic success, an opportunity for marginalized areas to become active participants in the 'global village' and the beginning of a new era for Africa (Beebe *et al.* 2003; Waverman *et al.* 2005). However, few of these claims and hopes are based on empirical research. While Africa is indeed the least technologically advanced continent, to focus too narrowly on direct ownership as a measure of accessibility to ICTs is to underestimate the importance of the social and cultural shaping of technologies. This study investigates how Africans, in spite of their technological marginality, are able to creatively appropriate the limited technologies at their disposal. At the same time, there are indications that an unequivocally positive interpretation of ICT penetration is not justified. A study of Tanzania has shown how the introduction of ICT has led to an increase in social inequalities, both locally and globally (Molony 2007). Similarly, according to a survey by the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the largest group of Internet users were young, predominantly male, well-educated, with above-average incomes, English-speaking and attached to NGOs, the media, private companies and universities (Franda 2002: 18; for a similar profile in Western countries, see Becker 1996). Little is known about the consequences of such an ICT-user profile for relations amongst youngsters, between generations and between genders. These aspects of access and inequality were extensively discussed during a workshop in Bamenda and related to issues of sexuality, morality and cultural values (see Point 8b). Workshop participants stressed that research should go beyond issues of inequality in terms of access and include the business surrounding new ICTs with its new hierarchical structures, the aggressive advertising campaigns and the related problems of regulation, public policy and licensing.

There is the need to problematize ICTs and to investigate 'alternative options in the adoption of new technologies' with a view to understanding the various strategies for the 'social shaping' of ICT (Lyon 1986: 585-86). For example, far from being 'a monolithic or placeless cyberspace', the Internet consists of 'numerous technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations' (Miller & Slater 2000: 1-25). Applied to Africa, it is regrettable that the scholarly focus has been rather on what ICTs *do to* Africans instead of what Africans *do with* ICTs through 'enculturation' (van Binsbergen 2004).

### **Programme outline**

This project aims to investigate the relationship between new ICTs, mobility, social space and marginality in Africa. Given the long history of translocal mobility of even the most marginal of African communities, communication technologies are of vital importance for an understanding of the social, political, economic and cultural dynamics of such mobility, especially in terms of new inequalities and social hierarchies. In tune with a global context of accelerated mobility, this research into the transformation of social space in marginal areas intends to draw on mobile social networks. The term 'mobile margins' is proposed to denote the connection between 'remote regions' and the migrant communities attached to them. The concept 'mobile margins' captures the dynamic interaction between 'remote regions' and 'underprivileged social categories' that may be resident in the 'centres' of political, social and economic dynamics but at the same time remain on the fringes of society (de Bruijn *et al.* 2001; Nyamnjoh 2006; Brinkman 2005b). New mobility patterns and



dynamics of social interaction between migrants and their home communities result from the introduction of ICT, just as old logics are mobilized to shape the new ICTs (Castells 1996/2000). Amongst the ICTs, the Internet and the mobile phone are the most striking in their global impact and are particularly relevant to understanding the possibilities and limitations of marginal regions and social categories.

In Africa, the biggest increase in new ICTs has been in mobile telephone usage, followed by the Internet. These recent technological innovations take on highly specific properties in terms of fixedness and flexibility, speed and distance, orality/literacy, etc. The existing literature on new ICT often posits these in a historical vacuum (Hannerz 1992; Horst & Miller 2006). 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 (Charpy & Hassane 2004; Howard & Shain 2005; Patterson 1990; Tall 2004). This helps to explain our interest in the history of communication technologies in Africa in general, and in the selected countries and regions in particular (Gewald 2006).

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?

Through the concept of 'mobile margins' we seek to link the project to the discussion on how mobility shapes and is in turn shaped by African societies (de Bruijn *et al.* 2001; Urry 2000). Mobility in Africa takes many forms and especially in marginal areas these can be conflict-related (refugeeism, displacement), economically motivated (labour migration) and include aspirations to mobility. Migration and mobility enable people to create communities that are neither homogenous nor confined to particular geographical spaces but form strings of people who relate to one another in different ways. These communities are comprised of individuals and groups from various socio-cultural backgrounds and economic standing. In this regard, James Ferguson's notion of 'Africa' as a category through which a 'world' is structured is very instructive, as our interest in particular places, spaces or communities is not rigidly geographically or culturally bounded (Ferguson 2006: 5). Our particular interest is in mobile communities in and from marginal areas, each with a specific history of social inclusion and exclusion related to situations of poverty, crisis and conflict.

Outsiders classify these areas and their inhabitants as not participating in mainstream economic, political and social life, a view that is often shared by the people concerned. Their feelings of exclusion and deprivation may be very strong but such emic views on marginality in the context of shifting mobile networks have so far largely gone unstudied (Das & Poole 2004; Kopytoff 1987). A historical perspective of the processes of marginalization is imperative for our understanding: we therefore aim to situate marginalization as a differentiated and varied process, socially constructed over time.

The project's focus is linked to ongoing debates in 'communication anthropology' and development communication (Castells *et al.* 2007; Horst & Miller 2006; Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte 2006) and to the broader debate on the relationship between technology and society (Noam 1999). Modern technology is often presented either as antithetical to marginalized regions and communities or as a magic multiplier of exogenously conceived and designed social change communication



(Nyamnjoh 2005). However, in this proposal we start from the idea that patterns of mobility and contact are strongly related to the presence or absence and social appropriation of ICT. The appropriation and social shaping of ICT open up alternative alleys of contact, while closing off, reinforcing or redefining other routes and means of interaction can lead to the renegotiation or reaffirmation of social hierarchies and inequalities. Adoption of new ICTs may influence lifestyles, create new mobility patterns and forge new links between migrants and their home communities (Buijs 2000; Diop 2002; Tall 2004; Horst & Miller 2006, cf. Goggin 2006). Thus there is a need to understand how socio-economic relations in the 'mobile margins' of Africa are simultaneously transformed and maintained through the appropriation of ICT (*Current Anthropology* 2005; Law 1991; Woolgar 1997; Oudshoorn & Pintch 2003). This project seeks to interpret patterns of poverty and inequalities in local and global relations without succumbing to the dominant conceptualization of ICTs in terms of linear technical progress and the tendency to perceive individuals and communities in the developing world as mere recipients or passive consumers of ICTs (cf. Berman *et al.* 2001; van Binsbergen 2004; Cheneau Loquay 2004; Molony 2007).

Only detailed comparative studies such as those envisaged in this programme can capture the particulars of the social impact, dynamic ramifications and processes of enculturation of the introduction of new ICTs like the mobile phone. The comparative method demands an in-depth knowledge of the focus areas, of the background and contexts in which to understand the appropriation of ICTs: hence the crucial importance of the longstanding research experience of the programme's senior researchers in each of the areas. The case studies are not being undertaken in isolation but can be compared on the basis of their varied contexts and types of mobilities, their different histories of marginalization, their degrees of elite formation and identity construction, their involvement in conflict, tension and war, and their history in the introduction of communication technologies. The countries and geographical areas from which these case studies are to be drawn are: Cameroon (North West and South West Provinces); Mali (the central region and regions bordering Burkina Faso and extending into Cote d'Ivoire); Angola (northern and south-eastern regions); and Chad (central and southern regions where oil exploration is underway). The selection of these geographical spaces will not prevent researchers from following migrants' paths into other local, regional, national and international contexts.

#### *Methodologies*

The methodology of a project on mobile margins should be flexible, revolving around strings of people and not necessarily 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 (Werbner 1991), we look forward to combining these insights with current explorations in the field of migrant cultures and transnational studies (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). 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 (Miller & Slater 2000; Charpy & Hassane 2004).

Academic publications (PhD dissertations, Masters theses, books and articles) will try to answer the various research questions for each specific study. However, these results also need to be filtered into policy circles and to the ICT companies through reports, a film, publications in the local, national and international media and discussions, public debates and workshops. Dissemination of the research results are further described in the summary communication plan.

#### b. Interdisciplinary and integrative approach



The research aims to feed into current preoccupations with rethinking African development (*CODESRIA Bulletin* 3 & 4 2005), to contribute to a better and nuanced understanding of African agency (de Bruijn *et al.* 2007) and to inform policy with critical insights from the mobile margins. In line with the quest for alternatives, this study concentrates on grassroots research in contrast with models where ICT has served mostly the interests of powerful external forces (Nyamnjoh 2007). The research will also systematically monitor the democratic and corporate social responsibility credentials of the ICT companies operating in Africa. This involves drawing in end-users' views on costs, efficiency and services, local evaluations of ICT business organization, ICT publicity and advertising campaigns, and public policy, licensing and regulation processes. The project is designed explicitly to engage with ICT companies and development organizations in these debates.

ICT companies and NGOs will be involved in the formulation, implementation and progress of the research. Intensive collaboration is envisaged with various scholars in the case-study countries: the University of Buea and Langaa Research and Publishing of Bamenda in Cameroon, Point Sud in Mali, the University of N'djaména in Chad and the Catholic University of Angola. The programme aims to include PhD and MA projects with candidates from the case-study countries. The senior scholars involved are from varied academic and research backgrounds in such disciplines and fields as anthropology, history, sociology, political science and communication studies.

The integration of the case studies will be ensured through a common methodology workshop at the beginning of the project as well as continuing methodological interchange thereafter. Not only is it intended that senior researchers will visit the different research locations to obtain first-hand knowledge of the research contexts but the entire research group will meet regularly in the case-study countries at varying locations. The aim is not merely to exchange research findings but also to discuss conceptualization in the interests of a comparative approach. Given the centrality of migration, mobility, citizenship and development to policy makers and development agents, the participation of NGOs, ICT companies, local politicians and policy makers at the project workshops will be ensured. Exchanges with stakeholders and within the research team will also take the form of dissemination through publications in print and electronically.

## **9. Management and Monitoring and Evaluation** Word count: 402

Professor Mirjam de Bruijn from the African Studies Centre (ASC) in Leiden, the Netherlands and a member of CNWS Leiden University, and Dr Francis B. Nyamnjoh of CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal, will coordinate the project, which will be managed as part of the 'Connections and Transformations' theme group at the ASC. Inge Brinkman (ASC, Leiden) will have a special role in the coordination of the project and communication with stakeholders, in addition to her role as researcher responsible for the Angolan case studies. The cases studies will be executed by the combination of PhD, Masters and post-doc research. We propose including PhD students for the studies in Chad, Cameroon and Angola. The candidate for Cameroon: Richard Akum, who is currently with CODESRIA, has a strong background in journalism and mass communication and has an MA degree. In Mali, research will be carried out with Masters students associated with Point Sud, coupled to the existing research project of Lotte Pelckmans (ASC, CNWS, WOTRO funding (W 52-1084)) on mobility and social hierarchy in Mali and beyond, and coordinated by Naffet Keita of Point Sud. The PhD candidate for Chad, Djimet Sele, will be supervised and coordinated by Prof. Alio Khalil from the University of N'djaména. In Angola, research will be carried out by Inge Brinkman in cooperation with MA students and a PhD candidate from the research institute CEIC (Centro de Estudos e Investigação Científica) at UCAN (Universidade Católica de Angola). Dr Noelma Viegas d'Abreu of CEIC and Dr Inge Brinkman will coordinate the Angolan case studies. The PhD projects will be supervised by the coordinators of the project and the senior researchers from the different



research institutes. The coordinators and senior researchers will not limit their role to supervision but will also be actively involved in doing research.

Research progress will be ensured through close cooperation within the research team. The aims of the project will be furthered through various workshops at which the different stakeholders will meet, by way of research reports and finally through supervision of the thesis writing. For PhD and Masters students several courses aimed at developing methodological, theoretical insights and writing skills will sustain this process.

An important measuring point will consist of the dissemination of the results outside the scholarly sphere and debates with ICT and policy-making circles. Networks in this area have already been established and during the workshop in Bamenda (Cameroon) this exchange also took place.

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