Mobile Phone Communication in the margins of Africa:
Continuity and change of communication patterns and society

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Abstract
Anno 2010 the mobile phone seems to be an everyday device in African societies. The phone culture is a given, especially in cities but increasingly as well in rural areas where almost everybody lives in a circle of 50 km from mobile reach. It is only 20 years ago that the first cities in Africa were connected and only since a few years that the rural areas are within mobile reach. It is because of this short implementation phase that the 'normality' of the mobile phone in Africa raises many questions. Why the mobile phone was so easily adopted? What changes did it bring to African societies? Was the revolution in technological change a societal change as well; and if so in what sense and for whom?
In this paper we investigate these questions for so called 'marginal' mobile populations in Africa. These are people from marginal areas who have been pushed out of these areas for creating a better livelihood, for political reasons, etc., leading to the formation of mobile societies/communities. These are people whose relationships expand over vast social spaces, and for whom communication is a pivotal importance for their social life. Especially in these populations we expect social change due to new ICT's, especially the mobile phone. Case studies from Cameroon and Mali (pastoral nomadic societies), and Chad and Angola (refugees, displaced people for political reasons) show that we should consider mobile phones in a sequence of communication strategies of the people living in these mobile societies, that indeed means social change and economic change, but at the same time is a continuation of existing social patterns. The phone culture is part of existing communication cultures in Africa.

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Introduction: the specificity of marginality
Our contribution for today is based on research in so-called marginal areas in Africa. The term marginality is often used as a blanket term. In our programme we try to specify marginality and to describe it in its historical context. Obviously various factors may be involved and it is the historical interplay between all the factors involved that renders each of these regions marginal in its own specific way. Such marginality may be related to a history of poverty. And/or to climatic factors, such as drought, floods, inaccessible mountains, poor soils, etc. And/or to a lack of state and private services in the realm of education, health, transport, communication, etc. And/or to a process of political marginalization, in which the people of the region are not allowed a voice in central government institutions. Etc.
Here we base our discussion on research in Central Chad and South-East Angola: relatively dry areas with few economic possibilities and a long history of marginality and in Anglophone Cameroon and North Angola, areas with a more recent history of political marginalization. Central mali @
Invariably such marginality leads to insecurity: daily life in these regions is not certain, it may be subject to sudden calamities (like disease, death, violence etc) always and it may be subject to more process-like calamities (like not having a job, not having access to land, education, etc).

(Global) movements
We tend to think that marginal regions are isolated. In a way they are, as the road network and public transport – the whole infrastructure in fact – is usually rudimentary or even nearly non-existent. Example: until 2002 in south-east Angola (some 200.000km2) not even 100 km tarred road could be found.
Yet, for people in these regions, mobility and social networks are often crucial in their life. People travel a lot, not only in search of work, life experience, but also because in some regions travelling is the way of life. It does not need to be explained, it would require explanation if people stayed in one place. A strong example are the people from south-east Angola: James Clifford's notion of 'dwelling-in-travel' would form a good description. Visiting patterns, rotating, slash-and-burn agriculture, labour migration, etc: all these factors contribute to a high degree of mobility. In North Angola this is different: agricultural life is in principle sedentary, but people have moved in search of health services, education and better pay to Congo/Zaire (now RDC) and because of the prolonged war in Angola. Such mobility has not been restricted to regional spheres. From South-East Angola many people have moved to mines in Zambia and South Africa, and especially from North Angola, Central Mali and West-Cameroon - where elite formation has been a feature for long – people of relatively well-to-do status have moved to Europe and USA.
This means that in our world today, the North and the South have become interwoven and a process of globalization is taking place. Of course, there was movement - for example of colonial officials and missionaries – from the North to the South, but often this meant a relatively sharp break. Now the movements are more intensive and faster and, importantly, contacts between people in North and South can in principle be organized on a daily basis. And, research results, so far show that indeed, people forms strings of contact and social networks and try to do so on an intensive level.

This is not to say that this increasing globalization world has removed past inequalities. On the contrary, the differences seem to have become larger and more visible, although they may have changed in nature. People from so-called marginal areas – even if of a relatively wealthy background – in the West usually end up at the fringes of society, thus forming mobile margins. Ferguson (2006) has described the global world as having "shadow sides". In the global world people do not have equal chances – these inequalities are often based on historical relations of power. For some the global world is not accessible: it only comes in indirect form: through rumours, and in bits and pieces, only partially, a distant relative who travels to a far-away place.

Development and ICT

The processes of globalization have changed our notions of 'development'. Today 'partnerships' with the South and listening to voices from the South are central issues in discussions on development cooperation. No longer can development cooperation programmes be designed and planned entirely in the West. There is also a growing awareness that poverty is not 'situated' in the South: there are rich people in the South and poor people in the West. The entire 'geography of poverty' has fallen to pieces. It is clear that we can no longer discuss the world in terms of the South that needs development, or the North that develops. These worlds are intertwined, as are the systems of inequality as well. In the globalized world, the North and the South are intermingled and the hierarchies of the South are being reproduced in the North and vice versa. Africa is no longer only present in the geographically located Africa. Africa and African relationships are everywhere in our world.

In this context global flows knowledge and information are becoming increasingly important. It is precisely for this reason that the ICT revolution is being hailed in development circles. It is held that new ICT can play an important role in the development of the South in this new globalized era.

Yet, such positive evaluations are not based in any empirical research. Here we want to discuss the various effects the ICT revolution and the globalized world are having on the discussion about the direction of development. Through our examples we will discuss the so-called ICT revolutions and the continuities and changes it has wrought in terms of social hierarchies and poverty.

Hierarchies without borders

We will present the work of a PhD student, Lotte Pelckmans. She is at present writing up her thesis and will publish it soon. Mirjam and Lotte worked together to study the structural relations of dependency that exist in Sahelian societies. This research was done in Central Mali, where societies based on slave labour developed in the 19th century and these master-slave relationships persist to this day. These societies are no longer bound to one geographical place but have spread around the world. This is a process that started with nomadism, continued with labour migration and recently developed into the diasporic communities that are centred in Europe and the United States. As Lotte will show in her thesis, despite the globalization of these societies, the master-slave relationship still persists as a form of dependency relationship. The history of slavery, embedded in the personal histories of both slaves and masters is still present and inform the structures and all aspects of the daily lives of these people who still live 'together' all over the world. (see Pelckmans fc).

Another example is the system of hierarchies in the Grassfields in Cameroon, where chiefdoms have existed for a long time. They may be less explicit than in the Sahelian societies but dependency relationships are important hierarchical configurations in

everyday life. They structure itineraries people can follow. These old hierarchies in the Grassfields are combined with more recently developed hierarchies as they appeared under missionary influence and colonial regimes.

A history of mobility, under the influence of migration labour, has turned these Cameroonian communities into global communities. But, as in the Malian case, in the diaspora similar dependency patterns are being reproduced. (refer to work Richard Akum, fc.)

Poverty, information and voice

To indicate the connections that crisscross the world of today, scholars have introduced the concept of the network society. Structures of relating are multiple and often span long distances. The network society goes hand in glove with the development of the Information society that can be noticed through the increasing presence/use of Information and Communication Technologies. As noted, knowledge flows are increasingly important. And, as such, knowledge about one another is increasingly possible.

However those who live in the world's shadows or those who do not have access to the information society are destined to become the new poor. Knowledge flows and networks do not escape the structural inequalities described above. The definition of poverty needs to be revised. In a globalized world where information flows define our position, where the worlds of the poor and the rich come together, it is becoming increasingly important to be able to express oneself, to defend one's position. To be able to do so, one needs to belong to a society that can defend its rights. In this respect it is no longer material poverty that counts but it is increasingly important to have knowledge about the world, about one's rights, to voice one's ideals and wishes and to be in charge of oneself.

Those who do not have this kind of knowledge can be labeled culturally poor (Nyamnjoh 2004). Cultural poverty is increasingly put on the agenda of development organizations like UNESCO and the World Bank, and it has received a short paragraph in the Millennium Development Goals as well. Those who live in the shadows of our global world often lack the means to define their own cultural rights. This is in addition to the fact that they often live on the edges of the economy and are thus face poverty in an economic sense.

Yet, these remarks about cultural poverty are not taken to their conclusions in development circles. Still, a simple model of introducing new ICTs prevails, without taking into account what consequences this may have for existing local and global hierarchies. The frightening thing is in fact that global hierarchies become intertwined with local inequalities, as described for the Cameroonian and Malian diasporas above.

New ICTs and revolutionary change

As indicated new ICTs are hailed as the solution many development problems. Through these new devices, it is held, information can spread to all corners of the world and even the most remote areas can participate in the information society. The infrastructure is relatively easy to install and the technological possibilities are endless. Even the 'global shadows' can be reached and the 'voice' of the poor can be heard wherever whenever.

There are fascinating plans in terms of e-learning: education will no longer be related to places where institutes are located, but educational services can in principle be provided in any village in the developing world. The same holds for health services: there exist promising plans of exchange between hospitals. Likewise we may think of information campaigns: in Botswana for example, SMS technology is used to conduct campaigns on

HIV/AIDS. Such ideas are not restricted to these services, but are indeed also part of the Corporate Social Responsibility plans of big companies, like Nokia and Ericsson.

We merely have to think of the possibilities for e-banking, having the potential to revolutionize the rural areas of –for example - Africa. We also may think of the economic possibilities: job creation, income generating processes, economic empowerment indeed.

This obviously can also have consequences in the political realm. The mobile phone and wireless technology are considered as tools that can reach out to the poor quite easily. They are ascribed action in the sense that they can democratize societies, democratize access to information, political action can be organized through these new devices. The mobile phone is the tool that should allow access for the poorest of the poor to information flows and open up the world for them. This is the tool that has the possibility to give people the rights they need, or at least to inform them about their rights.

And indeed new ICTs have spread with tremendous speed. Not only in cities of the developing world, but also increasingly in rural areas, internet and the mobile phone can be found.

How do end-users in so-called marginal areas evaluate these developments themselves?

Local evaluations
Tita Nswi, town quarter head from Babungo in Cameroon:
'When my phone is not with me, it seems like the world is completely cut off from me … If
they want to say that the white man has done something for us, it should be that cell phone'

The Fon of Mankon (Angwafo III, S.A.N.) also expresses positive views. He rules his kingdom in the Grassfields but his subordinates live all over the world. When we asked him about his view on the mobile phone, the first things he mentioned that he could talk to all his children in Europe and America in an hour. 'It is a means of communication that the poor can have' …

These quotes are examples of positive evaluations of the introduction of the mobile phone. The mobile phone is clearly making a difference for people.

In Angola, where war raged between 1961 and 2002, people have been able to re-establish contact with long-lost relatives through the mobile phone. The reconstruction of family ties is deemed a crucial ingredient of the peace-building process s. So peace and the new ICT are associated with each other.

Another example is how a nomadic woman from central Mali reconnected with her husband who had left her and her child long ago. He turned out to live in Paris where he was successful, remarried and had three children. He started to send money to his wife and daughter in Mali when she began calling him every two months. And to do so, she had to travel to the nearby town to access the mobile phone network. (23. picture of Douentza and network) Forgotten linkages are being re-established in a form that, for those who migrated, is not always very pleasant. They are being forced to send money using wireless technology with Western Union and Moneygram. They are literally being followed by their compatriots to the other side of the world (Nyamnjoh 2005, Cheneau

Locquay 2004). Today the place where this woman and her daughter live has a wireless mast itself (24. show picture of Boni and mast anno 2008).

We should not view this as 'impact' or 'influence' of new ICT, as if end-users are mere passive recipients of new technologies. In our work we stress interaction between technology and society: technologies have a bearing on society, but people also creatively appropriate new technologies.

For example, in the economic niches that have developed in the realm of new ICT young people in particular are participating. The organization of this new economic branch is in itself completely new with the sale of phone cards, sale of airtime, cash payment of airtime. The companies involved, for example, Celtel/Zain in Chad, Orange Malitel in Mali and MTN in Cameroon, have introduced a layered system for these products.

Apart from youth, we also discovered that in some contexts women may benefit particularly from the introduction of new ICT and that they evaluate the mobile phone as a device that empowers and liberates them. In Islamic northern Sudan, for example, women can link up with new customers without leaving the house, contact their loved ones abroad, arrange love affairs etc (de Bruijn *et al.* 2008).

But balanced views

This brings us to public debates on new ICT in developing countries. While in development circles the views are often only positive, a much more balanced view is often held by end-users in African countries and elsewhere. In Sudan, for example, there are discussions about the dangers that the mobile phone poses for morality. The mobile phone is being seen by local people as destroying norms and values.

The Fon of Mankon in Cameroon whom we quoted, first lauded the mobile phone for its positive aspects. But right after that he added that the mobile phone keeps people apart, and is breaking up society. Hackers and Internet scams have emerged in Cameroon

and Nigeria and have global networks that we would label as criminal. Youth may spend hours on Internet dreaming away on dating networks and other sites to find out about possible routes to Europe and the State. Not only the danger of internet addiction, but also trade in humans, international prostitution networks etc pose a risk connected to this development.

People are often sharply aware of the problems in the realm of privacy related to the mobile phone. They are critical about the aggressive ad campaigns of the multinational companies. They know that the largest profits are not for the local economy, but are with the multinationals.

They are also much more conscious of the dangers of information. In development circles information is regarded as positive only: the 'information society' has to spread to all corners of the world. But in many countries people know information to be a double-edged sword that can also be wielded against them. The mobile phone can become part of a regime that controls people, their everyday lives. Oppressive states can use it too and areas where people lived without any government interference are now directly within reach of state informants, networks of police, political control, etc. The possibilities to escape state control have become less.

Reinforcing existing power relations

This latter remark about state control points to the issue of local power relations. Where oppressive regimes are gaining in control, hierarchical relations are not only reinforced but even strengthened.

This also may be the case in economic sense. We discovered that the people who man the companies' phone booths in Anglophone Cameroon are often dependent of the owners of the booths that are often the wealthier people, or the elder brother or an uncle, thus following the lines of 'traditional' power relations in society. In a sense the arrival of the mobile phone has created employment and possibilities for people who would normally not have an income, but it has also reinforced relations of dependence.

The same holds for central Mali and south-east Angola. In 2005 some smaller towns in Central Mali got Internet but this was because the NGO world based there needed to be connected to be able to do their work effectively. The NGOs have become globalized but the people with whom they are working have not. A similar situation can be noted for south-east Angola, where only organizations in the development sector have an internet connection. When there was a crisis in Chad, it was easier to learn about the events through the internet in Europe than in Chad itself. Chadian friends asked Mirjam to tell about the situation in their country.

People in so-called marginal regions are often very creative in putting new ICT to use. But obviously they view the fact that they are forced to be so creative as cumbersome and they feel disadvantaged. They feel that they can only benefit from devices such as the mobile phone in a partial manner. Because the network is always down, because there is no electricity to charge battery packs, no money to buy airtime, etc etc. They feel that, although such new ICT are helpful, they at the same time make the marginality of their region more explicit. It is not a revolution, but has become part of the daily struggle to make things work (Brinkman, Alessi 2010). This has also been shown for India, where there is no proof that ICTs have functioned as drivers for development (Osama 2006).

In conclusion
The positive evaluation of new ICT in relation to development needs qualification. To view this relation in terms of 'positive effects' of new ICT is way too simplistic and amounts to technological determinism. Firstly because the interaction between technology and society cannot be caught in terms of 'effects': these are processes of mutual interaction between people and new tools. Secondly because such a stance takes as its basic principle a neutral world (Ya'u). We do not live in a neutral world and new technologies are shown to function and put to use in a context of hierarchical relations, in politically charged environments.

We have shown in this paper that end-users in the developing world are sharply aware of the potential development possibilities of new ICT, but also of the potential reproduction and even production of local and global power relations that are becoming increasingly intertwined. Divides along social, class or ethnic lines are becoming ever more defined in the international space, leading in turn to a compartmentalization of the complex divides in the world. The global shadows are becoming worlds in themselves: mobile communities in the margins of the world.

Who benefits from the development of new ICT? Have new ICTs formed revolutionary tools everywhere?
The answers are not straightforward. Local end-users in Africa indicate that there are positive aspects to new ICT, but they also point to possible negative effects. Local end-users in Africa also indicate that especially the mobile phone is forming a revolutionary

tool in some ways. But, at the same time, they explain how these devices have become part of the daily struggle to make things work.

Who are the poor? Who benefits? Who views him/herself as empowered by new ICT? Who evaluates these new ICT and in what directions? How do new ICT connect to existing power relations and/or create new local and international hierarchies? Who uses new ICT and in what creative, or not so creative, manners?

It is these questions that we must first confront before assessing ICT as revolutionary or not, as beneficial for development or not.