The Nile Connection
Effects and Meaning of the Mobile Phone in a (Post)War Economy in Karima, Khartoum and Juba, Sudan

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Foreword

This report presents the findings of preliminary research undertaken into the effects and meaning of the mobile phone in Sudan. It was conceptualized as a first pilot study in the framework of collaboration between the telecommunications company Zain and the African Studies Centre in Leiden that started in July 2007. This pilot study is part of a larger research project entitled ‘Mobile Africa Revisited, ICT and Society in Africa’, which focuses on the relationship between new ICT (especially mobile phones) and society and culture in Africa. The project is intended as a comparative study of various regions on the African continent, with a special emphasis on so-called remote or marginal areas. The study will consider interaction between new ICTs and social relations, especially regarding mobility patterns. The word ‘interaction’ is crucial here: ICTs are viewed as shaping societies but also as being shaped by societies.

This theme can only be studied meaningfully with a qualitative methodology. In this sense, the study is different from earlier studies that were primarily based on the results of quantitative research. Qualitatively, the project, of which this current study forms part, aims to relate mobile phone use to the wider historical and socio-cultural context of an area and thus achieve a greater in-depth knowledge of the processes involved. Qualitative research engenders a better understanding of people’s evaluations of the mobile phone and the meanings attributed to new communication technologies. As the focus is on local people and not on predefined models, the results may be unexpected and novel relations and insights may be explored. The pilot study in Sudan was in this respect a methodological experiment and turned out to hold very exciting prospects for future comparative research.

Points of departure

The main focus of this report is on end-user interpretations of the introduction of the mobile phone, the interface between the mobile phone and socio-economic relations, and the creative uses to which the mobile phone is being put. A second line of study has been business people and mobile phone markets, including (international) trading networks and the problems and successes of the mobile phone market. The mobile phone is framed in the wider context of communication technologies in the history of Sudan. As end-users, people often do not realize the amount of labour involved in constructing, operating and maintaining communication technologies. On the basis of the interviews held in this study with business people and end-users, little can be said on this subject. Additional specific research would need to be devoted to this particular theme.

This research has been inspired by studies on mobile telephony based on observations in Latin America, the United States and Europe. In their approach to ‘communication anthropology’, Horst and Miller studied the social relations that are being created by the use of the cell phone, and Goggin and Katz offer an interpretation of aspects of mobile phone culture in which the issue of identity is central. In their approaches, new communication technologies are not seen in deterministic terms: the introduction of the mobile phone does not automatically dictate changes in society. On the contrary, technology and society are defined in a relationship of mutual appropriation. This has also informed our approach and we

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strongly argue against the thesis of technological determinism that presumes a causal relationship between technology and society. Processes of such mutual appropriation that occurred in the past may be instructive, and since such appropriation is likely to be related to particular historical, socio-cultural, economic and political contexts, comparative approaches in research, even of single case studies like Sudan, are absolutely fundamental. That is why we have combined the anthropological qualitative approach with historical interpretation in a comparative perspective in this report. Framing communication technologies in their historical context also qualifies the presumed ‘information revolution’. After all, ‘all media were once new media’.5

Given the dynamics indicated above, it follows that we can only meaningfully study communication technologies in their relations to a particular time and context. Instead of universal data, relations will always be specific and context-bound. In this case, it was soon clear that usage of the mobile phone influences and is influenced by the many forms of mobility of Sudanese people. Sudan has always been a central country in the region, trade relations have crossed borders, and transport and communication technologies have played an important in the country’s history. The recent political instabilities in the country have increased mobility and added new forms of mobility to the pre-existing forms. In this study, we have paid special attention to people’s various forms of mobility and their relationship with ICTs.

The mobile phone in Europe and the US has become an important gadget for individual identities, as it shapes and reshapes social relations. In many African contexts, this conclusion would give rise to comparative questions not only about the histories of individual identities but also the different trajectories of (tele)communication technologies. The history and culture of interaction with these technologies in Africa often draw in the history of imperialism, resistance against colonialism and postcolonial political conditions. In some regions of Africa, mass telecommunication technologies have hitherto hardly played a role and the introduction of the mobile phone signals the first widespread means of mass communication. It is, therefore, important to understand the ways in which the mobile phone relates to these earlier histories of transport and communication and to study earlier processes of appropriation and inscription of communication technologies.

For our research we formulated research questions that clearly indicate our concern with the interactive relationship between communication technologies and society:

· How has the introduction of the mobile phone affected the economies of the Sudanese in various situations in the country?
· How has the introduction of the mobile phone shaped and reshaped the daily lives of people in Sudan?
· How do new communication technologies influence relations in the widespread, translocal, refugee and migrant communities that are so much part of the social history of Sudan?

For this preliminary research in Sudan we chose three case-study areas that varied in their historical relation to communication technologies in general and to the mobile phone in particular. Karima, Khartoum and Juba each represent a different context within the overall Sudanese framework. As explained in the methodological outline below, we chose to develop the case studies according to their context, namely: ‘New social configurations in Karima’, ‘The mobile phone, modernity and change in Khartoum’, and ‘War, business and mobile telephony in Juba’.

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Mobile telephony is a new field of study and, in the Sudanese case, even general literature on transport and communication is scant. It thus comes as no surprise that, in the course of this research, new elements and aspects of the mobile telephone business in Sudan came up that will require further study in the future. A notable area is Sudan’s political context. Its recent history and current political situation informs not only the daily lives of many people, especially in the south and west of the country, but also directly relates to the possibilities and limitations of the development of the telecom industry. In this report we note the effects of the war, especially in terms of the distance relationships that it has created between people and families. Yet, although we mention the policies and politics of the telecommunication companies, the time frame did not allow us to go into this theme in detail.

This study will contribute to the debate on the relationship between ICT and development. New ICTs are often unequivocally expected to lead to positive effects in terms of socio-economic developments in Africa. Optimism reigns regarding the possibilities of new communication technologies reducing poverty, fostering economic opportunities and helping to create a healthy socio-economic climate.

Instead of a priori supposing this positive relationship between new ICTs and development, it seemed more worthwhile here to study development directions and to describe local evaluations of the mobile phone.

This pilot study was conducted over a five-month period and involved a literature study, fieldwork, the transcription of interviews and observations, the writing of this report and the production of a short film and can therefore only yield preliminary results. It is impossible to come up with comprehensive in-depth and insightful qualitative research on a complex and multidimensional phenomenon as the mutual appropriation between Sudanese societies and ICTs in such a time span. In the conclusion we elaborate on interesting fields that we feel require more in-depth study.

**Research methodologies**

The pilot study focused on the so-called micro level of research. This does not mean that we only come up with micro-level analysis but in our methodology the emphasis rests on the analysis of cultural and social processes that are in play at the level of family life and social networks in relation to the introduction of the mobile phone.

The qualitative methods used in this study were mainly the in-depth interview with open-ended questions and observation of mobile phone use and the integration of the mobile phone in daily life. The open interviews were conducted by all the members of the team. Two Sudanese researchers – both resident in Khartoum, one familiar with the Juba context, the other with Karima – carried out interviews for about three weeks in Juba, Khartoum and Karima. Most of these were held in colloquial Arabic and transcribed into English. The two Dutch researchers each went to Sudan for two weeks to supervise the two Sudanese researchers, carry out their own interviews and become acquainted with the research situation in the country.

A list of the interviews held can be found at the end of this report.

The case studies each called for a unique approach, leading to different directions of inquiry. The case study in Karima entitled ‘New social configurations in Karima’ concerns a small town in the northern state of Sudan where the mobile phone has been introduced only relatively recently. It reveals the relationship between the mobile phone and the fluctuating dynamics of the overall transport and communication sector. The research team followed a

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4 Inge Brinkman went for two weeks from July 18 to August 4 2007, she visited Juba and Khartoum; Mirjam went in September (20-29), Khartoum and a visit on Sept 24 with Zain staff to O’Beid and El Fasher) and from November 20 to December 2, 2007 (Khartoum, Karima, Juba). The production of the film was done during this period together with Sjoerd Sijsma. Inge met Hisham and Peter and started the research, Mirjam’s visits had the character of follow-up and supervision. These visits were in close collaboration with Hisham and Peter.
family and their daily lives and observed their ordinary usage of the mobile phone; thus allowing a perspective ‘from below’ on mobile phone usage and seeing the appropriation processes in connection with life in a small town with its own rhythm and connections. In the capital Khartoum, which forms the second case-study area, mobile phones have been present now for almost a decade. Here the emphasis is on mobile phone culture and the debate surrounding this new communication technology. As these debates concern adolescents in particular as an important and innovative group of end-users, we chose to focus on the student population and its various networks. In the Juba case study, we considered the mobile phone in view of the legacy of the war and the economic prospects and problems connected with the post-war context. The emphasis was therefore placed on interviews with business people who creatively struggle with the particular disadvantages and possibilities of the Juba market.

Special attention is paid to the historical context of communication in Sudan. This aspect of the research is based on a literature review of the history of communication in Sudan as well as on oral history, especially interviews with older people. The short research period did not allow time for any archival research.

Qualitative research requires research relations that are built on trust and long-term observation, and in-depth knowledge has not yet been built up because of time constraints. This report should thus be considered as preliminary and indicative only of the possible directions in which the relationship between mobile phones and society in Sudan may develop.

Main findings
This report is based on preliminary research and the main findings should be read as guidelines for future research rather than as final conclusions.

· Mobile phones have become the most important means of communication in Sudan: between people from different regions, between people who live outside Sudan and even within towns. For some regions in Sudan this new means of communication constitutes a drastic change in comparison to the recent period of war that led to a vast reduction in communication possibilities for civilians. At the same time, the legacy of war still looms large and many of the present problems in transport and communications are related to this history of warfare and political tension.
· The introduction of the mobile phone has led to various developments in the economic sector: a new market has emerged around the technology itself with (re)new(ed) international linkages (mainly to Dubai, Egypt and Saudi Arabia) and complex chains of distribution and services ranging from multinational companies to market stalls. In addition, the mobile phone has become a device to assist in the organization and expansion of various types of commercial enterprises, including small-scale, informal business.
· In the relationship between the genders, the mobile phone has become a crucial catalyst for change. Many (especially young) people see the mobile phone as a device that helps them pursue their own chosen path in life and opens up possible new contacts and opportunities. This naturally has consequences in an Islamic society for gender relations where new opportunities are being created, especially for (young) women. This is leading to intense debates on morality and sexuality.
· The mobile phone is used in many creative ways, and has become, particularly in regions where it is well integrated (like in Khartoum) a marker of identity within the realms of a mobile phone culture. In remote areas where people are displaced over long distances as a result of war or for economic reasons, the mobile phone has become a means of keeping families and social groups together: distance no longer means rupture for these families. In
cases of forced displacement, the mobile phone becomes an active tool and mobile phone activism plays a role.

- Mobile phone technology is clearly extending rapidly even to the poorer sections of Sudanese society and many people stressed the positive effects it has had in business terms. At the same time, it became clear that the mobile phone will not lead to an equal society. On the contrary, it will exacerbate differences between the haves and the have-nots and increase the gap in economic opportunities open to people. These tendencies appear most clearly in the Juba case study.

- Access to qualitative communication technologies is an important asset for the socio-cultural development of a society. This study, however, also shows the negative sides of this development: new forms of inequality, the debate on morality, and the direction of changes in social relations were not considered positive by all informants.

- It became clear that the field of telecommunications is closely interrelated with a country’s political developments. In a complex political situation, such as that in present-day Sudan, the effects of the extension of the mobile phone network and the functioning of the companies interact with state policies and political controversies in the country.

- At all levels, new media such as the mobile phone enter into a historical context of socio-economic and political relations and a set of earlier communication technologies. In Sudan the particularities of the history of Condominium rule and postcolonial state policies show not only at the macro level in the ways in which mobile telephone companies operate but also at a micro level, in the daily usage of the mobile phone.

Our future research questions will concentrate on the following areas:

1. New ICTs and development;
2. The relationship between new ICTs, various forms of mobility and socioeconomic development;
3. Morality, identity and social relations, more specifically gender relations and relations between the generations;
4. The political economy of the mobile phone technology (national politics, political tensions, the mobile phone companies and the history of ICTs); and
5. The historical embedding of new communication technologies (relations with older communication technologies, with historical patterns of mobility and communication, with past policies and politics).