

'Communicating Africa'
Researching mobile communities and social transformation in Angola and Cameroon.

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ABSTRACT

In state policies and development programmes, communities are still conceptually bound to geography. The notion 'community' is regarded as intrinsically bound to place and interventions are geared towards change in a specific location.

This idea has already been criticised: it has been proposed to view a community more as a network than as a place. These debates have, however, been strongly tied to the issue of 'modernity'; such mobile communities are seen as linked to processes of globalisation and new possibilities in terms of travel and communication.

Here we argue that such notions of community have existed for long: in much of the world's history people viewed their community not so much as people in a particular place, but rather as strings of people in various locations. In such a make-up, communication is not a luxury only to be used when all others needs are satisfied; it is the very basis on which communities are built. Without communication, people may lose connection and a community may eventually cease to exist. Such close links between community and communication call for a different approach to new ICT than has hitherto been in vogue: instead of a focus on communication technologies as such, we propose research and policies to be geared toward life histories of mobility and connections.

Introduction

In the mid 1990s it was regarded as a business risk for mobile telephone companies to invest in Africa. By now it is clear, however, that huge profits are being made by such companies and the mobile telephone is spreading rapidly in many African countries. As the infrastructure of mobile telephony is relatively uncomplicated, networks oftentimes also reach into areas with difficult access and limited other transport and communication facilities. Especially since the turn of the century mobile telephone use has increased immensely not only in Africa's urban centres, but also in the rural areas.¹

(opening picture: right to communicate)

The mobile phone 'industry' has become strongly visible in African contexts. Not only can networks masts be seen in the most unlikely places, huge billboards are scattered across the

¹ Africa: Telecoms Acceleration, Africa Focus, May 17, 2008; In 2004 PANOS reported about the huge gap in the division of mobile telephony between the rural and urban areas in Africa. Most companies invested firstly in urban areas, also for commercial reasons. (Panos, 'Telephones in Africa: Mind the Gap', Panos Media Brief 2004). See for statistics about the spread of mobile telephony per country: www.itu.int/ITUtelecome; ICT indications for 2007: www.tinjurl.com/3gyvdkl; Recent journalistic articles about mobile telephony stress the important social and economic changes this new technology brings (S. Corbett, Can the cell phone help end global poverty? New York Times, April 13, 2008); The Economist (Nomads at last, a special report on mobile telecoms, The Economist, April 12, 2008).

landscape and buildings are being painted in the colours of the companies. In many towns there are stalls where calls and credit transfers are being sold and people can be seen using their mobile phone in any public place.

Apart from these visible changes in the landscape, our studies in Sudan and Cameroon have also revealed that the mobile phone has induced economic, social and cultural changes in many respects. Many African people are in one way or the other involved in the economy surrounding mobile telephony, in public debate the advantages and disadvantages of the mobile phone are being discussed and social relations are said to be influenced by this new means of communication.² Research in other African countries, such as Tanzania³, Ghana⁴, Zanzibar⁵, etc, has shown similar developments and changes. Many African people regard the mobile phone as a modern and revolutionary introduction. As most newly introduced technologies are being evaluated in this manner, questions can be posed by this theory of 'modernism' and 'revolution', but the fact remains that the mobile telephone markets in Africa are amongst the most rapidly growing in the world.

The reasons for this massive increase are as yet under-researched. Some scholars indeed put forth a thesis of modernisation and consumption.⁶ Others have proposed to understand mobile telephone use in Africa in its specificity of establishing social networks.⁷ Another argument is that the phone fits the specific youth cultures that have developed in African towns.

(picture of phone use, of the technology itself)

Studies of new communication technology in Africa (and in general) often start from the notion that the introduction of the technology is the driving factor behind the changes we observe, concepts like 'effect', 'impact', 'consequences' etc are indicative of such a unidirectional approach. Horst & Miller (2006) and also de Bruijn et al (2009) argue for a more mutual relationship between technology and society, i.e. a technology may indeed lead to changes in society, but people also appropriate new technologies in creative and unexpected ways. The manners in which new technologies are put to use in a given society are oftentimes informed by historical and cultural patterns in these societies. The relations between technology and society are hence processes of dual shaping, linked to history and culture.

So as to understand these processes of dual shaping, an approach that merely focuses on technology does not suffice; an understanding of the perspectives of end users becomes a prerequisite for interpreting the multifarious relations between newly introduced communication technologies and society. Questions like: 'Who are the people using the mobile phone?', 'How do people integrate this device into their lives?' and 'what are end users' perspectives on the mobile phone', become pertinent to research. In this article we will delve into the notion of community and its signification and 'form' in several countries in Africa. Our hypothesis is that the shape of these communities largely explains the rapid spread of the mobile phone, rather than that the object of the phone itself is responsible for these transformations. Furthermore we argue that these recent developments should be

² De Bruijn et al 2009, Brinkman & de Bruijn 2009, Nkwi 2009

³ Molony 2007, 2009

⁴ Castells 2008

⁵ Pfaff 2009

⁶ Hahn and Kibora.

⁷ Castells 2007, Horst & Miller 2006

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understood in their historical context, the context of the configuration of these communities. In this paper we use examples from Northern Angola⁸ and South-West Cameroon.⁹

Mobile phone use in the history of communication and mobility of families and communities in North Angola and in South-West Cameroon

The two contexts: Western Cameroon and Northern Angola: regions with differences and similarities in the ways communication has taken shape.

North Angola:

(picture of environment of Northern Angola)

This part of Angola is the old heartland of Kongo kingdom, but was later destroyed and became a marginalised region within the Angolan state. Before colonialism, mobility took various forms, such as the caravan trade and visits between family branches. By the time this area became incorporated in the Portuguese colony of Angola, the importance of caravan trade had diminished, but other forms of mobility continued despite the new international borders. The colonial border between Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola had little meaning in that culturally and linguistically speaking the areas on both sides of the border formed a continuum and many ties existed, in social, political and economic sense. People continued to visit across the borders and contacts went on. In some senses, however, the border acquired meaning. Depending on the tax regimes, colonial violence, forced labour, labour, health and educational opportunities people moved across the border on a much larger scale than before.

By far the largest movement of people in the region's history occurred after the war started in 1961. Over half a million people fled northern Angola, mostly to Congo/Zaire, and many of these refugees did not return to their home country until over a decade later when the war stopped and Angola became independent in 1975. As fighting was resumed soon after, people fled from the region again, this time not only to Zaire, but also to Luanda and to an increasing level to the European and American continent. So the war (between 1961-1974 and again – with intervals – between 1975 and 2002 had an enormous influence on patterns of mobility, communication and community.

[picture Cordeiro]: Sr. Cordeiro of Mbanza Kongo was 7 years old when the family left Mbanza Kongo and fled through the bush to Congo where they stayed until 1975. Upon their arrival they identified people of the same maternal clan and stayed in that village, where they worked the land and gave part of the harvest to the paternal owners. In 1975 they returned to Mbanza Kongo and only then did he see his sister back. His little sister had been left behind in the confusion of fleeing and the Roman Catholic nuns (who continued to operate under Portuguese role) took her up in the orphanage where other children who had been left behind were gathered. Through other refugees, they had received the news that she was alive, but they only saw her back when she had grown from a 4-year old toddler to a girl of 17 years old.

⁸ Archival research was undertaken between 2001 and 2004, 3 brief field visits were made in 2002, 2003 and 2009.

⁹ We started our work in Cameroon in 2006. Walter Nkwi is a PhD student in the project and works on the history of communication technology in this area; Mirjam de Bruijn and Francis Nyamnjoh have done several short periods of fieldwork in the area concentrating on the mobile phone culture; both also work on mobility in the area.

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In 1975 the war returned, but the family decided to stay in Mbanza Kongo. Because they felt discriminated against in Zaire, they felt it was even better to die in Angola than to return to Zaire again. When there was heavy fighting around the town, they at times had to flee to the bush for a couple of weeks. He also every now and then walked to Zaire (now RDC) to sell in trade wares, like peanuts and cikuanje (cassava in banana leaves) and then buy matches and soap etc with it. 4 to 5 days walk and then back. They then also smuggled in letters: in a plastic bag you stuff it in the cikuanje sticks. Because it was dangerous to have letters found by the custom officials, who would suspect any writing of political contents and arrest the person. In the letters warnings would be written, like 'do not use this or that road, as it dangerous by this time.

The family fled again in the same manner as in 1961, when the fighting was too much in 1999, again on foot, again through the bush. The child of Mr Cordeiro's sister died during this journey. In 2002, when there was peace, they returned again to Angola. The family still has relatives in Congo and recently they went to visit for a month, travelling there by car. The children learned some Lingala; this was considered important by the informant. There are also visitors from Congo coming to their house every now and then. The family also has a house in Luanda, where they go, now with road traffic possible it is easy to reach there.

Since the mobile phone was introduced they call their relatives, they stopped writing letters and call their relatives. At first came the Vodacom network from Congo in 2005: one had to stand on a specific high place and wave the phone in the air to reach contacts in Congo. In 2006, Angolan companies also came. Letter writing is still used to contact people in areas where the network has not reached yet. Whereas there are many people returning to the region, they mostly stay in the regional towns and only few enter the country-side, for such reasons of lack of facilities: no education, no hospitals, no roads, no network, etc. Mr. Cordeiro holds that the mobile phone is practical in terms of contacting relatives in Luanda and Congo, and he also knows many stories of people who have found relatives, even in places like Belgium and Italy, through the use of the mobile phone.¹⁰

South-Western Cameroon: the Grassfields, Bamenda region
(picture of landscape)

This mountainous area was both a refuge area for people fleeing the wars of the big empires in the Sahel-Sudan zone of the 18th and 19th century, as it was an area where kingdoms were founded. These kingdoms became settled in the valleys of the region but only after they had been itinerant for a long time. The kingdoms (fondoms) are notorious for their wars and multiple displacements. Under German and later British colonial regimes the area became part of the colonial empire and formed a union with present day Nigeria. English was the lingua franca as for the name today is Anglophone Cameroon. Trade relations, family relations developed or continued to exist in this area. Under colonial rule the kingdoms became more established and were given power in the system of indirect rule.

Under the kingdoms slave trade and refuge were among the movements that people made. But also in daily practice movement was part of life; cultivation practices in this area were itinerant. The chiefdoms controlled the mobility of its people, for instance by sending slaves, and incorporating them, but also during colonial time when the plantation economy was established flows of people were regulated on demand of the colonisers. Thus the colonial economy introduced new mobilities. Mobility over the Nigerian 'borders' and trade relations, and other exchanges did not cease to continue. It was during the colonial time that

¹⁰ Conversation 8.

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nomadic herders, Fulani, came into the area leaving the Northern parts of Nigeria, Cameroon or Chad. They left their areas in search for better pasture and to flee from wars and conflict. They were allowed by the kings of the Grassfields to live in the Grassfields. Animal husbandry developed in this period. The Fulani became semi-sedentary and a transhumance system developed in the hills. They established their own chiefdom that was founded in Sabga a small village next to Bamenda. Also the kings have become large cattle holders, the Fulani their herdsmen. Cattle trade routes developed between Nigeria and Cameroon. Of course this all developed under control and guidance of the colonial administrators.

At independence Anglophone Cameroon joined French Cameroon and separated from Nigeria. However this did not end the mobilities between the regions, though the border became a reality in terms of tax, customs etc. Also many relations between communities, families etc. exist between these two countries. The division between the two countries has until today its political ramification.¹¹ Families from the Bamenda area have connections towards the areas of the plantations, to northern and eastern Nigeria, etc. The different areas are part of the lifeworlds of the people in various geographies.

After independence movement towards the states, overseas, became a normal extension of people's geographies, both for the search of work and for education many Cameroonians from the Grassfields moved to the States. Another important destination overseas are the countries of the former colonial powers, Britain and Germany. Interestingly though the majority of people who moved out overseas are people from some specific kingdoms (we are still figuring out why these and not others).

After independence the Fulani who did not enter the western educational system, were not on the forefront to change mobility patterns. They only gradually moved to the cities and developed different lifestyles. The possibilities to move with their cattle diminished and their interest in cattle rearing probably also diminished for various reasons. Many young men engaged in trade in the capital city and other larger cities, and developed linkages there. They also engaged in driving cars, both large trucks and taxis.

In general Cameroonians today are known for their mobility and migration. A large diaspora community is present in Washington DC. American policy (lottery, green card) stimulate people to embark on this journey. And it seems that it is rather normal to do so and seen as a continuation of mobilities. The term Bushfaller depicts these migrants very well as they are people who go out hunting to come back with game. In many cases however the game is not as rich as they had hoped for (Nyamnjuh fc). The phenomenon of bushfalling has gained large proportions and has now also entered en gros the Fulani lifestyle (Pelikana fc).

A historical study of communication in the Grassfields (Nkwi forthcoming) shows that the high mobility of people in the area has indeed led to the spread of people from families over the African continent and overseas. Despite the lack of good infrastructure mobility and communication has been part and parcel of every family's history. Also the British and German administrators complained about the difficulties to communicate, but at the same time they saw that people were keeping contact by travelling. Moving up and down from Bamenda area to the plantation areas in the South, as labourers or as educated civil servants colours the lives of most of the interviewees. In the interviews with older people who lived these times it comes to the fore that they have always lived with these mobilities; Their ways of communicating being shaped by this fact. Letter writing was a very common feature of these often educated people (by the catholic mission schools). Letters were kept in the house on a place where they were well exposed, for instance packages of letters above the entrance of the house. Nowadays people still keep these letter archives and are proud on it.

¹¹ (Konings & Nyamnjuh 200.)

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Communicating with those far was not only important for the information it brought but also in the showing of the fact that one had relatives living abroad.

The Fulani are an interesting case in this regard. They have a mobile lifestyle that traces back to past generations. In their family histories the history of travel is central, as it also was the essence for their cattle economy. Every family traces relations to people in Nigeria, Northern Cameroon or Chad (cf. de Bruijn 2007). Their communication was travelling, though in many cases contacts were lost with family members far away. The Fulani define their communities by strings of people, the possession of wealth that is on the move. Their culture is a very good example of a culture that internalised mobility. They did not engage in a similar development of plantation labour, letter writing and schooling as the other groups in the Bamenda Grassfields, but after independence they have gradually hooked up. Their way of moving seems to have pushed them to enter driving. Also their former links with Nigeria never ended, on the contrary many Fulani men who left cattle herding in Cameroon moved to Nigeria to places where they had family to enter odd jobs, or enter work as drivers. In the histories of families we have gathered these links are still very visible.

The mobile telephone was introduced in Bamenda at the end of the 1990ies. Orange and MTN nowadays define the phone landscape in the region. Recently Camtel, the national phone company also entered the market of mobile telephony and the market is still growing as the opening of a large MTN office in Bamenda town indicates. During one of our first visits to Bamenda town in 2006 we were struck by the colour yellow in town, MTN campaigns had clearly coloured the town (picture of taxi, yellow; picture of MTN head office). The first phone cards were very expensive but soon enough prices dropped and one of the strategies of the companies was to allow those people access who were among the poorest segments of society. They have been very successful in their strategies. Today it is possible to get a transfer of many for 200 FCFA, so that you can simply 'beep' another person, for instance a relative far away. The phone has made a big difference for people in the countryside, who although the network is often very sparse do also use the phone frequently. It is interesting to see how in villages people have phones although there is no electricity and network only available on the top of the hill (picture of cabine at top of hill in Fonfuka). Also many Fulani who keep their cattle in the bush gather around these points to call family members or even to inform for market situations.

Let us move to the history of one Fulani family to understand how they integrated phone use in their community.

(picture of Sabga hill)

Sabga is a Fulani village, 20 minutes drive from Bamenda up the hills to the East. The inhabitants of Sabga are no longer nomadic. Their cattle kept in farms with clearly demarcated grazing areas and part of the year a transhumant pattern with herders. Instead these Fulani have developed into the direction of an urban lifestyle. The families we met in Sabga all have close relatives who moved to Bamenda, Douala or Yaounde, engaging in trade, as drivers or some other odd jobs. Some families have a special relation with Nigeria, as they moved themselves to Nigeria for a few years, or as did their relatives. Thus the mobile lifestyle, though no longer being rythmed by the animals, has led these families to being spread over large geographies.

(picture of Mariamma and daughters)

Mariamma moved to Sabga as an older woman when she married for the second time. Her mother in her eighties lives in one of the farms up hill. Mariamma and her husband lived their

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married life in Panso, in the northern parts of the Grassfields, where the cattle of the family are herded. The first time I met Mariamma in Sabga in January 2007, her daughters visited her because of the Muslim festivities around tabaski. Mariamma has ten children, 6 daughters and 4 sons. The youngest is a son: Hamidou, who she clearly adores, and who schools in Bamenda. I did not figure out where the other three sons are. Her daughters do not live in Sabga. One is still in the neighbourhood of Panso with her husband and children. Another daughter lives in Yaounde. She has a 'salon de coiffure' in Yaounde and is married to a man from Nkambe who works at the UN. That is why she will be in Ethiopia from June to the end of July (2007). Her second daughter Habsatu is married with a driver from Jeannot, the company who commutes between Buea and Bamenda. She has lived for ten years in Nigeria with this man who was also driver in Nigeria and nowadays they live in Bamenda. Another daughter lives in Nigeria. Habsatu 'lent' her daughter to her childless sister. This daughter goes to school in Nigeria. (Picture of Mariamma in her house with pictures) The pictures on the wall of Mariamma's house invited us to talk about her brother. One of the pictures is a man before a typical American landscape. It is Mariamma's brother in America, who left twenty years ago. He married an American lady and has now two children and lives near Washington. His younger brother followed him.

Habsatu has a tailor workshop in Bamenda. (picture) She started the tailor working place in Nigeria and took the machines with her when they moved to Bamenda (to flee the interethnic 'wars' in Nigeria). Since a few years she has a mobile phone and explains that it is so important for her to be in contact with her sisters, to call to her daughter and sister in Nigeria, to be able also to contact her uncle in America. She gave me the number of the uncle in America. Since she has a phone she calls him regularly. She transfers his messages to the others. Habsatu explains that it is since four years that they intensively use the phone. Before that time they had sporadic contact with the uncles in America because it was very expensive. They had to go to the post office telephone in Bamenda. It was Ali (their brother in America) who would also call via his brother with a fixed phone in Bamenda. For 1000 CFA you could just say hello (noddi tan timi). They would also write letters. Sending a letter to America would cost 500 CFA. Interestingly enough they did not calculate the costs of the cell-phone. Habsatu's sister from Yaounde, Rukiatu, also has a phone. Both were called several times during our stay in Sabga. Later when I visited Rukiatu in Yaounde, where she lives in a two rooms apartment on the second floor, the phone was her constant company. She called with people from Sabga, with her sister in Bamenda and with her husband, explaining the daily practices.

With Haue, another sister, I shared the sleeping room that night. She told me she is divorced. She was married in another village of Fulbe in the Grassfields. She left her 5 children with her husband. She visits them from time to time, and was thinking aloud what she could do. Now she felt like she was 'sitting', without work. She would like to go to Bamenda, where she then probably could work in a house or something, but on the other hand that would also be difficult for her. But if you have no other choice? The other two daughters of Mariamma present married within the Fulbe community, and live in small villages in the environment of Panso. These three sisters had no phones in 2007.

Mariamma had no phone in 2007. When I left and gave Mariamma a gift she told me this would add to her savings to buy her own phone. In 2008 she did have a phone given to her by her daughter Habsatu. Habsatu also gave a phone to her daughter, and to her youngest brother. She wants to be in contact with them. It is clear that she is doing good business in her tailor shop and as she explains herself the phone does facilitate her work. She no longer travels that much to buy her cloth, but can call and pay through western Union. She buys her cloth in Ngaoundere and Garoua where the Fulani style is more present than in Bamenda.

That summer the brother Ali visited Sabga, Yaounde and Douala. Habsatu explained that this was the result of the intensified contact they had with the help of the mobile phone. Ali simply could no longer refuse to visit his family. His stay was very short. The pictures that Habsatu showed me later of this visit show everybody in his or her best outfit and cars to celebrate the event.

Historicizing mobile communities

These encounters and stories show that communities are not per se geographically bound; they may also be built over long distances. The cases reveal how people may move as a community, but also how people in distant locations may still be part of one and the same community. Territoriality is in such cases of minor consequence for the construction of communities; people imagine their communities more in terms of connections than of place.

How can we denote these mobile communities in Africa?

The answer lies in the understanding of mobility, flexibility and the flouting of and juggling with borders; the examples we gave show this very clearly: mobility/connection/community as historical processes constantly in the making.

So we argue that such less-locative notions of community have existed for long in Africa. And other examples show that in fact in much of the world's history people viewed their community not so much as people in a particular place, but rather as strings of people in various locations. For many people in the world, mobility is life: 'dwelling in travel'¹² and identity formation takes place in the framework of connections rather than locations.¹³ Interaction between people who see themselves as forming one community has been a central feature not only of many African societies, also in European history examples abound of mobile communities, in which various communication technologies were used to keep connections alive.¹⁴

People may relate to and identify with other people not necessarily because of geographical proximity, but identifying in terms of kinship or professional ties over borders. Community in this manner relates less to locality than to perceived shared notions of identity. Connections rather than place form a community.

The Fulani we presented in the case for Cameroon are an example in extreme. They identify with each other for two reasons; one being a shared ideal of wealth: cattle, and the second being mobility in itself. For them being mobile is being free and freedom seems to be one of the important indicators of their social well being and identity (cf. Riesman 1977).

We are not the first to criticise the idea of place/community equation: it has been proposed to view a community more as a network than as a place. These debates have, however, been strongly tied to the issue of 'modernity'; such mobile communities are seen as linked to processes of globalisation and new possibilities in terms of travel and communication. Horst and Miller (2006), for example, in their path-breaking work on mobile phone, propose to view community in terms of network but do not take a historical approach. Also in Manuel Castells famous work, the 'network society' is predominantly seen as a condition of modernity.¹⁵

¹² See also Ingold 2000

¹³ James Clifford

¹⁴ Darrell R. Meadows, 'Engineering exile: social networks and the French Atlantic community, 1789-1809', *French Historical Studies* 23, 1 (2000) pp. 67-102.

¹⁵ Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, 'From kinship to link-up. Cell phones and social networking in Jamaica', *Current Anthropology* 46, 5 (2005); Manuel Castells, 'Communication, power and counter-power in the network society', *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007) pp. 238-266.

Likewise other studies, for example on the virtual communities, exclusively relate these to new ICT.¹⁶

Such patterns of community construction are, however, as the examples show, not necessarily new; in these cases they are historical processes that date back considerable time. We cannot assume furthermore that the forms of community construction are static; they may change according to socio-political and economic circumstances. The dynamics leading to the formation of mobile communities may differ. The case of North Angola shows that communities have become increasingly mobile, or multi-spatial as a consequence of new ways of relating and doing as they appeared during the long period of war. In Cameroon communities were mobile and confronted with different forms of mobility from pre-colonial times and in fact each new political epoch added to the mobilities of these communities. In Cameroon we were also confronted with two different forms of communities who internalised different forms of mobilities; the Fulani nomads and the Grassfielders.

Mobile communities communicate

In such mobile communities connections are more important than territory. In order to create and maintain such connections, communication is crucial. It is clear from these stories that society and communication go together. For connections to remain active, communication plays a vital role. It is not a luxury only to be used when all others needs are satisfied; it is the very stuff on which community is built. Without communication, people may lose connection and a community may eventually cease to exist.

As the examples from Angola and Cameroon show people have always sought to be in connection, and developed several strategies, from talking drum to mobile phone and all the phases in between. Travelling itself, physical displacement can be considered a communication technology. It is our conviction that this at least partly explains the success of new communication technologies, such as the mobile phone, on the African continent.

This approach can only hold if we do away with the location/community equation and take as our guiding principle the mobility-connection/community approach. This leads us away from technology per se and into family lives over borders, mobile communities, dispersed identities etc. Not as a sign of modernity or globalisation, but as phenomena that have normalcy to many people in many eras. This also has important consequences for the notion of communication, technology and people.

Mobile community shaping the technology and vice versa

The cases show that it is not the tool per se that makes the difference, but people using it in a way that befits their lives. If we interpret the mobile phone as a technology only, and view it as determining change then we misunderstand the way it is developed and integrated in society. It appears that the communication ecology of these African communities are easily fit to the mobile telephone technology. Or that communities are formed in a way that they shape and give form to the mobile phone.

Nevertheless each new communication technology may make a difference and reshape mobilities. We thus say that the mobile phone first entered into a communication ecology that fits the phone, but then the phone and its entourage took such a form and in itself shaped society into new modes of mobilities. The cases we showed from Angola and Cameroon are

¹⁶ H. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (London: MIT Press 2000).

both illustrating for this point. It is clear that the families would have been more distanced without the mobile phones. The mobile phone also shapes ideas about the other world, that is why some authors suggest the virtual mobility as a possibility (Nyamnjoh fc. De Bruijn 2008).

Controlling mobilities

New mobilities do develop within the same communities, in similar dynamics as are known from the past. We suggested above that mobilities are shaped under certain circumstances as was the war in Angola, or controlled by empires, regimes etc as is clearly the case in Cameroon. The question of power hierarchies that control mobility is important and relevant to consider in relation to the mobile phone technology. Who controls the expansion of the mobile phone at national level, who defines the use at the regional, community and family level? Is it related to old forms of power relations and dependencies or does it open new relations of inequality that in themselves lead to new possibilities or restrictions for movement? The case of Habsatu is illustrative. As a woman in a Muslim society she gains a lot of freedom through the mobile phone, that makes her movements though probably not physically, but virtually and therefore in economic and social terms much more wide spread than she could have imagined without the mobile phone. Although some informants indicate trying to control others through the mobile phone, subordinates like women and youth indicate that they may use the mobile phone also to avoid control and expand their horizons.

Consequence for method

In order to understand then the impact and creative appropriation of new communication technologies, such as the mobile phone, research must hence not start at the technology end, but rather at the mobility/connection end. This immediately becomes apparent 'in the field'; it is next to impossible to have a lengthy conversation about the mobile phone (or any other communication technology) as such. People do not discuss the mobile phone as an object in itself, but rather bring it up when telling about their lives. This may seem very obvious, but in fact has enormous methodological consequences, not only for research, but also for development planning and state interventions. The guiding principle in our programme has not been 'the mobile phone' as such, but more the life histories of end-users. These life histories are in many cases centred on mobility and connections. In this our approach differs from Horst and Miller who offer an analysis of 'mobile phone culture' (as many others, see above), but not of the lives of the people using mobile phones.

Slide : of interview situation [mbanza]

This emphasis in our research programme also ties the programme very strongly to history. People discuss their lives in terms of past and present possibilities for interchange and stress the embedded relations between old and new technologies. They do not tell about their lives as cut into slices, periodising their life history in terms of 'my life before I could write letters', 'my life after the introduction of the mobile phone'. This far more holistic approach has led us to even more strongly view new ICT as part of a history of communication technology, rather than a sudden and new 'introduction'.

That people do not discuss their lives in segmented terms is not to say that they do not tell about change. New transport and communication technologies do have a bearing on connections and mobility and people are strongly aware of this. The mobile phone, for example, has very quickly become a major point of reference in many discussions. For example when discusses the ancient tower of communication in Mbanza Kongo (next to the oldest church on African church the so-called tower of communication next to what is

claimed to be the ruins of the oldest church in sub-Saharan Africa, built in the 16th century), a man commented: ‘As there was no telephone in those days, somebody would climb on the tower and with the trumpet announce something or call a gathering.’¹⁷ Also at the town’s museum, it was held that the ‘talking drums were the telephone of the past’. In other words, the history of communication technologies is related and seen in reference to the newly introduced mobile phone (similar to our experience in Bafut fon palace museum, Cameroon).

The new technology of the mobile phone is made to fit the lives of people; their communication patterns and by implication, the connections in terms of mobility and community.

The relation between development and ICT

Our ideas about mobile communities and the necessity for communicating, and the idea that research (and policy intervention for that matter) starts with the social environment and not with the technology - a social environment that is not geographically bounded - stand in noted contrast with many old and current approaches to community that are also prevalent in development thinking.

In state policies and development programmes, communities are still conceptually bound to geography. The notion ‘community’ is regarded as intrinsically bound to place and interventions are geared towards change in a specific location. In practice many development programmes remain place-based, and even if there is more attention to people/person-based approaches, these people/persons are not seen in their inter-linkages with the people with whom they identify (in the same or in different locations).

James Scott, in his work on state and development, showed how state bureaucracies attempted a process of fixation and standardisation of both localities and citizens, states seeming ‘an enemy of people who move around’.¹⁸ In many state policies, development programmes can even be largely interpreted as the transformation of space and inhabitants: ‘the transformation of peripheral non-state spaces into state spaces by the modern, developmentalist nation-state is ubiquitous and, for the inhabitants of such spaces, frequently traumatic’.¹⁹ Le Corbusier: ‘The despot is not a man. It is the plan.’²⁰ In other words, from state perspective, communities are not merely treated as bound to locality, they *ought* to be. Despite all changes, this legacy still continues to play a role in development planning and lingers on in conceptualisations of refugees, repatriation, community building, etc.

The colonial state was especially concerned with territory and keen on fixing people in geographic location. The colonial project in many ways revolved around fixing the international borders, and creating fixed ethnic groups in Native Reserves: a direct connection between people and territory was not only the ruling conception, it was also regarded as desirable. Also late colonial development programmes were geared towards community in a specific location. In many countries in Africa then, state policies were focused on community in place and postcolonial governments inherited a bureaucracy geared towards a sedentary ideal.

We argue here that such patterns of interpretation also influence the policies surrounding new ICT. There is an enormous attention for new ICT in development circles and also in state

¹⁷ Conversation 11

¹⁸ James Scott, *Seeing like a state*, p. 1.

¹⁹ James Scott, *Seeing like a state*, p. 187.

²⁰ James Scott, *seeing like a state*, p. 112.

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policies. This attention is, however, focused on the technologies as such. People are to be 'enabled' and subsequently expected to 'become active in their search for relevant information'.²¹ Such notions are similar to the idea of 'transfer of knowledge' of the 1960s development paradigm. As Susan Schech explains there have been changes as the role of the state has been reduced due to decentralisation processes and a stress on market-led initiatives, but the notion of 'transfer of knowledge' is very much the same as was propagated in the initial days of the 'Development Era'. Policies that take end-users and their communication patterns as their guiding principle are few and far between.

Our approach invites to rethink concepts like community development, ideas about refugee camps and repatriation, relations between identity/community and technology/know-how etc.

http://www.tiogand.net/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B6E78FA3C-C120-4F37-9B7D-5059F80AA2DE%7D

21 Susanne Schech, 'Wired for change: the links between ICTs and development discourses', *Journal of International Development* 14 (2002) pp. 13-23. Check quote