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"The telephone has grown legs": mobile communication and social change in the margins of African society

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Inaugural Address
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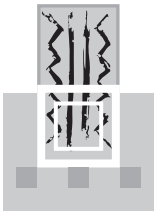
Afrika Studie centrum
African Studies Centre
Centre d'Etudes Africaines

'The Telephone Has Grown Legs':
Mobile Communication and Social Change in the Margins of African Society



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Inaugural Address
Mirjam de Bruijn

'The Telephone Has Grown Legs': [1]
Mobile Communication and Social Change in the Margins of African Society

Faculteit der Letteren

Universiteit Leiden

September 2008

My phone at home in the Netherlands never stops ringing nowadays and on the display I often see the Malian, Chadian or Cameroonian country codes. And in the evenings there are always 'missed calls' from African numbers too. This was unimaginable when I started doing my PhD research in central Mali in the early 1990s. For the people at home then, I was far away. People's understanding and experiences of distance are very different today.

At breakfast I often speak Fulfulde to Ahmadou, a herder from central Mali who tells me how he is sitting under the trees next to his cows. The costs of communication have apparently dropped so much that he can afford just to call to greet me, the owner of a part of his herd.

We met in 1990 and became like a brother and sister sharing life in the Fulani cattle camp where his father hosted me and my husband. Ahmadou is his eldest son and married two wives and has today 7 children. After the death of his father in 2006, he became the head of his family and clan. The telephone has given him the chance to change his life, as was apparent when he asked our family to support his political campaign. We agreed; after all it was the least we could do since he had herded our cows for so many years. Ahmadou has big plans. He would now like to build a house in the city. In one of our phone conversations, he asked me to bring him a television on my next visit. His last call was to communicate his victory in the political campaign!

For 35 years, the people of Chad have been living in the midst of a civil war and with repressive state machinery. But even in the regions where war and hunger are a daily reality, people now have access to mobile telephony in spite of widespread deep-rooted poverty. Mongo, the country's fifth-largest city, has had access to mobile telephony since 2005. I worked and lived in 2002/2003 in Mongo and met with Ousmanou who became one of my research assistants. Ousmanou did some investigation on his own, being a literate, and together we developed a plan for a NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) to help impoverished children who live in the streets of Mongo. He is married and has four children. The mobile phone helps to continue our exchanges. Ousmanou regularly sends text messages to keeps me updated of the recent ups and downs of his family and the city. The telephone has also been a good help to raise some funds for this NGO. However during the last upsurge of fighting in Chad (in 2008, and also before in 2006 and 2007), all telephone connections were cut, which led to a high degree of panic amongst our Chadian acquaintances (and us). With no way of contacting the outside world, their lives were suddenly once again in the hands of the authoritarian regime of President Idriss Deby.

It will be clear that the way information from these 'remote' parts of Africa is being transferred to those in the West has changed with these new methods of communication. The growth of mobile telephony in Africa became possible after the liberalization of the telecommunications market[2] and its escalation has been astonishing. The unexpectedly high access to mobile telephones has risen from 1 in 50 persons at the beginning of the 21st century to 1 in 3 just a few years later in 2008.[3] Even the inhabitants of remote rural areas in Africa are being introduced to the world of wireless telephony.

Ahmadou and Ousmanou live in marginal regions of the world where modern technology is sparse and where it is not

easy to survive due to the difficult natural and economic circumstances of these harsh regions and their political instability. Government interest and investment in marginal regions are usually minimal as they are considered to be areas of little economic or social interest. But Ahmadou and Ousmanou do not see themselves as being marginalized at all. For them, these regions are part of their identity and their use of the mobile phone makes it clear that these marginal areas are not isolated at all, in spite of the absence of good infrastructure. On the contrary, these regions' relations stretch as far as Europe. The margins cannot be demarcated geographically; they are social margins.

I am interested in the question if and how mobile telephony, a new communication technology, will change the social, political and economic dynamics in the social margins of our world in the coming years? Does it reflect a revolution in communication and development, or will nothing ultimately change at the end of the day?

Ahmadou and Ousmanou and their families in Mali and Chad have become part of these changes.
I have been following them and their families since 1990 and 2002 respectively and will continue doing so. And I have recently started a project in the Grassfields area in Cameroon. In the coming years I will be following families in Mali, Chad and Cameroon and try to understand the new dynamics in their societies also through their eyes.

Here, therefore, I am not presenting a completed story but an initial exploration of possible changes in the social margins of Africa. To be able to look into change I will introduce my understanding of the social margins, elaborate on the concept of communication ecology and social relations in the margins. And then I will explore possible social changes that are the result of the new communications technology. I will thus introduce a current and important field of study within African Studies, where interdisciplinary collaboration can make a contribution to the study of mobility and migration, of poverty and of social conflict.

African Margins

Why conduct research into the margins? This is a choice that is politically inspired and engaged: to know more about the people who are defined by 'us', the dominant culture, the politically and economically powerful, as the margins of the world. For people in the margins, the margins are the 'centre'. They have their own voice and vision of the so-called marginality that defines their lives. Any definition of the 'margins' is, therefore, ambiguous.

Margins are always relative and are defined in relation to the dominant norm. A political project can even be read into the term 'margin'. A turning point was the colonial period when Africa was considered as being in the margin of the world. Social anthropology emerged as a science for the study of the unknown, of the peoples in other parts of the world, of the 'other', with appreciated norms and values because they are primitive, exotic and beautiful. Thus, the admiration of Africa was that of the 'other continent' that was identifiable in a dichotomy between us and the other, between the primitive and the developed, between tradition and modernity.[4] Despite our insights into this process of 'othering',[5] we still think in dichotomies and imagine Africa as the other, captured in its geography.[6] An example of this is develop-

ment thinking in which the definition of Africa as a problematic continent gives a normative interpretation of the other, who is poor and therefore can receive help.[7]

However, this dichotomy is an ambiguous reality of our world. Enough studies of the social and economic history of Africa have demonstrated how connected Africa and perhaps surprisingly the marginal areas in Africa were and still are with 'our' world through trade links, slavery, daily life and ideas, albeit frequently in relations of inequality.[8] The study of transnational networks, migration patterns and the consequences of globalization can no longer be omitted from the study of Africa.[9] Africa is not only restricted to a particular area. As James Ferguson[10] interprets it so beautifully, 'Africa' is a category through which the world is shaped, not only as a geographical notion but also as a structuring principle in which there is space for many cultures, complexities, adjustments and mobilities. Africa is intertwined with the world, even as the margins within Africa. The other and the margins cannot be defined outside of ourselves. This interconnectedness takes on new forms with the present changes in communication possibilities.

We can explore the margins as social spaces in which people build an existence, even if it is sometimes minimal; and as political spaces with which the political, economic and social relations in our world (in relation to each other) are defined: the margins are the bottom step in the prevalent hierarchy. The margins play a role as a social and political space in identity formation and in social relations and networks within and beyond the margins.

The way of living together in the margins is constituted by 'insecurity'.[11] Mobility – literally displacement – is important in dealing with insecurity, either in fleeing the situation or in seeking economic improvement. Also, the people in the margins experience their position as marginal *vis-à-vis* others, especially if the result of living there is poverty. However, escaping this economic and political position appears to be hard. This is a historical given of the margins.[12] Usually such displacement leads the migrant or traveller to a similar economically and socially subordinate position; a displacement from one margin to another. Thus, over the course of history,[13] societies have been formed between places and in social spaces, with a specific social position.[14] These are known as migration cultures[15] or travelling cultures.[16]

As the examples of Ahmadou, the herder in Mali, and Ousmanou, the literate inhabitant of a war torn country, show us these social and mobile margins with all their problems and insecurities are also the centre of life. Within the social margins too, people actively design their own existence, minimal as it may be. To gain access to the margins is an economic strategy because specific activities develop there[17] and these social margins offer all kinds of possibilities for economic and social acting.[18] They are (semi-autonomous) social fields with their own laws and rules,[19] where different social groups – men, women, children and the elderly – all earn a living.[20]

These social fields are connected with that other, 'normal' world. A connection also exists with that world through, for example, labour relations, and because people can make the change to the other side. These are the ones who have made it. In the perceptions of the normal world, the margins serve as a mirror. The people in the margins have a place in that 'normal' world, characterized by poverty, illegality, criminality or madness.[21] The social margins do not fit within the

prevalent norm because of the mobility of the inhabitants of the margins but also because of the definition of their activities as being illegal and 'different'.[22] Government policy and politics have difficulty with the margins because they exist in the loophole of the established norms and the law.[23] From the margins, people have formulated a commentary on this imposed position. The social margins can be seen as disputed social spaces in which people can raise their voices and challenge or 'use' their marginality. Processes of in- and exclusion are part of this and lead to ever-changing social inequalities. Thus, the designation of the actual margins is always a politically charged issue.[24]

How can we research these social and mobile margins? Their study cannot be restricted to a particular area. These are travelling cultures in which the idea of displacement and travelling should be central to any analysis.[25] Who challenges the margins and does the researcher him/herself not become part of this political process? Research on the margins is an ethnographic adventure.

My own ethnographic adventure has been with nomads and migrants in Mali, Chad and Cameroon. Over the past 25 years, this voyage of discovery has given me the opportunity to examine how social margins come about and how they and geographical margins are connected to each other, and to see what an ambiguous position the margins occupy. Margins are defined from both the inside and the outside, as the examples I am about to present here show, and therefore get different meanings. Margins may be defined geographically, economically and politically and often these definitions intertwine in the relation between the margins and the dominant governance structures, i.e. the African State or the International world. But at the same time, as the examples show this marginality colours the identity of people from the margins.

Nomadic people offer us a very clear example. Nomads travel and are considered marginal since they live in ecologically marginal regions where they herd their cattle. Due to their mobile way of life, they have always been intangible for the state. Their connectivity with the ecology of the areas in which they live and their mobility are essential aspects of their identity as cattle nomads.

The nomad became a part of the social margins when the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s forced them to move to other areas further south and to the cities to work in the service of others. Their old way of life was connected to the new. Ahmadou's family has also dispersed and Ahmadou, himself a relatively rich cattle herder, has relations with people in the poverty economies in Ivory Coast, southern Mali and Ghana. It is a life 'on the move' in the social margins.[26]

Margins may also occur from neglect of the state as the example of Chad shows. Governments have never invested in central Chad where poverty is endemic and labour migration to Sudan, N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, and Nigeria dates from colonial times. Numerous civil wars have only worsened the rapidly deteriorating economic situation in these margins. Political repression is decentralized to the lowest level. The voice from the margins is weak because of the difficult position Chadians have due to living in poverty in a repressive regime and feelings of inferiority towards other countries.[27] Ousmanou's social margins spread as far as N'Djamena, Cameroon and Nigeria.

The Grassfields in Cameroon are an example of the political margins. This Anglophone part of Cameroon has always been disadvantaged in the national politics of Cameroon.

The Cameroonian Diaspora in Europe and the United States is strong and has an important say in local politics and is known for its significant contribution to the opposition of Cameroon. The Diaspora is a new phase in the history of the mobility of the Grassfields and migrants are investing back home in big villas, in political parties and in the identity of the Grass fielder.[28] The area has always been part of trade routes with Nigeria and in colonial times, labour from this area was used on the plantations. Each family in the Grassfields has a history of mobility.[29] The term 'bush fallers' points at the most recent current of migrants who have left Cameroon in search of a better existence elsewhere and away from their personally defined marginality in the Grassfields.

Communication Ecology

The examples of social and mobile margins in various parts of Africa and their coverage of vast social spaces leads us to question if and how people are able to keep in touch and communicate over these long distances. To understand this we have to delve into the domain of the relations between society and communication. As the examples above show, the social and mobile margins have been formed around a complex of relations and change, in which distance and belonging are central concepts. To better describe this complexity, as well as its connectivity with the other world, I want to introduce the concept of 'communication ecology' that was first used by Horst & Miller in a study into the relationship between mobile telephony and poverty in Jamaica[30].

I also want to relate the interpretation of ecology to my earlier work in which the relationship between people and society and the natural environment was central.
The concept of ecology offers an interesting line of approach to describe the relationship between human beings, society and the environment in which communication and communication technology play such an important role. Inspired by Ingold,[31] I see ecology as a complex net of relations between society, individuals and the environment within and beyond the margins, a web of relations that is never in balance and where place and power are continuously being redefined and renegotiated. Communication technology adds a new element to this set of relations, adding the virtual world, the world of relations and of communicating with the range of possibilities on which people can draw to make a living. In this web of relations and communication, people are constantly looking for new ways or *pathways* of communication. Societies too can develop pathways.[32] In these interactions, a moment of reciprocal appropriation of an individual or society and environment is enclosed. This is a dynamic culturally and socially specific process that leads to social transformation.[33] Power relations play a role in this process of interaction and appropriation and communication technology is part of the communication ecology and also of the interactions and processes of appropriation.[34]

So communication ecology is made up of interaction between the institutes that make communication possible: the possibilities that enable communication (social relations), communication technologies (e.g. roads, cars, telephones) and the people who are part of it. Communication ecology is culturally and socially informed and will therefore differ in space and time.

Change and Communication Ecology: The Importance of History

It is not easy to predict the relations and their changes in time in communication ecology. Change is never linear or direct. Nevertheless in the discussion on the relation between technology and the development of society optimism prevails about this relationship in less well-developed areas of the world (i.e. the margins).[35] The development discourse states that improvements in communication lead to direct improvements in the situation of poor people.[36] The introduction of ICT is the ultimate way in which the world's margins can be involved in the whole progressive development project. Development cooperation invests a lot in ICT by, for instance, supporting local organizations that are busy erecting communication centres in Africa[37] but also supporting big international companies to bring communication possibilities to the most remote areas of Africa.[38] Indeed these developments are part of the changes in the communication ecology of different margins in Africa and contribute to its increasing complexity.

However the relation between development and technology is not direct and should rather be part of our research agenda. How new are all these developments? What dynamics were there in the past around the introduction of communication technology? Historical research into the dynamics and complexity of Africa's communication ecology can give us insight into recent developments surrounding mobile telephony and, at the same time, critically examine optimistic development ideas.[39] After all, all media were once new media.[40]

Everyone's and every region's history has a unique complexity, as the examples below of the development of communication ecology of nomads in Mali and Chadian migrants show.

An Example from Mali

Mobility is in itself a communication technology as the nomads' essential way of communication is travelling. Mobility is a way of communicating and, at the same time, it shapes social institutions and ways of 'being' that are expressed in rituals, historical stories and in the moving itself. Moving with cattle can be seen as a ritual and the rhythm of the movement is the communication.[41]

During the time of the great empires in West Africa in the 19th century, travel was also a way of developing relations with state structures, either to negotiate access to grazing land or to escape the pressure of the state. In the 20th century, getting together during rituals at certain times of the year, like matrimony, was a moment of exchange. Once a year, one would hear news of others who were far away.

Migration to the south became a lot easier towards the end of the 20th century, after the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, and after the highway from the capital to central Mali was asphalted in 1985. Cars and buses became part of the mobility of the nomads and with their household goods, women and children could be transported to the south by taxi. This change led to a higher frequency of contact and visiting the north from the south became much easier. Of course nowhere near everyone could afford this and, for this reason, social differences increased.

In 1992 I talked to an old nomad woman in central Mali. For the first time, I had taken along my cassette recorder and asked her if I could record the conversation. She agreed. We talked for a long time. At the end of the conversation, she asked me what kind of radio it actually was that I had brought with me. I explained to her once again that it was

not a radio but a cassette recorder and that I could record things. After a while she asked me if I could do something for her. Could I come back the next day? She wanted to tell a story 'for the radio' for her son who was far away (she did not exactly know where, but it was far away). He had to know that so-and-so had passed away. The next day we sat together for an hour and she spoke in Fulfulde about all the people who had died. I had to pass the message on. She missed her son very much.

In this century changes in infrastructure have been amazingly rapid. Douentza, the provincial capital, had electricity and got its first television sets in 2002. In 2005 mobile telephony arrived. By 2006 the phone had reached Boni, 100 kilometres east of Douentza, and in 2008 the cattle herder Ahmadou could call people round the world from his camp, sitting under a tree in the middle of nowhere.

The Example of Chad

This example shows how political instability and poverty lead to mobility *without* the possibilities of communication. Chad has only 250 km of paved road, really very little for a country twice the size of France. Mongo, a town in central Chad, is connected to the capital by a laterite road that is destroyed each year by rain. Most people used to walk the 500 km between the town and the capital but over the last few decades, transport by truck has become an option, and recently taxi-buses have also become an option. News used to be transferred orally or by mail, often by drivers. In 2002, telephone communication became a possibility thanks to a few fixed lines: one at the post office and the other run by a church organization in town. Since 2006 mobile communication has been possible and although not many people own a telephone yet, the hope of doing so is always there.[42] The question asked of foreigners now is increasingly: 'Will you buy me a telephone?'. In the past, requests were always for money for food.

In the regions where nomads live and in the towns in Chad, there have been rapid changes in the technology of communication. Communication has, however, always been there, and changes in communication technology were also always happening. It seems as if the consequence is that with each new technology it becomes easier to bridge a distance, and have more contact with people who are farther away. Of course the big question is: how different are the developments now in comparison to those in the past? What consequences do the changes in communication have for economic development, the (re)definition of the social margins, mobility patterns, the development of social networks and the identity of the people in the margins?[43] These are important questions in the study of the social history of Africa.[44]

Communication Ecology: Social Relations

The examples from Mali and Chad mentioned above reflect a change in the ways people are maintaining and forming social relations. What consequences do the changes in communication technology have for the content of these relations? To be able to offer an answer, we first have to investigate which specific forms social relations take within travelling cultures in the margins. How do people in the margins establish and maintain their social relations here and far away with the new communication technologies available? What does 'here and far away' mean? How are social networks being shaped and what role is communication tech-

nology playing in this process? And how does this change the vision in the margins and the identity of the people within the margins *vis-à-vis* 'others'?

Flexibility is an important characteristic of social relations in a travelling culture in a context of 'insecurity'. Examples are flexibility in aid relations,[45] in kinship relations,[46] and in relations with the state (avoidance),[47] and certainly relations with the 'others': the people who the traveller meets in the new environment (see below for an elaboration on this specific relationship). Inequality and processes of in- and exclusion lead to a continuous redefinition of these relations and are part of this flexibility.[48] Recent developments in some parts of Africa show us that these relatively peaceful relations with the other in the social margins are under pressure because of growing political and economic insecurities which leads in some instances to an increased potential for conflict.

An example of this particular development can be illustrated by the developments in the host-stranger relation that was once described as conflict-reducing but is increasingly a vessel of social tensions.[49] How did this relationship develop with cattle nomads in Mali? In their life on the move, they have to adjust their relations with their host to get access to pasturelands for their cattle or labour for stockbreeding. The relationship between a cattle herder-crop farmer or nomad-sedentary farmer is the perfect example of host-stranger relations. The nomad is the stranger. In this relationship they keep their own identities.[50] Others are completely absorbed into the other world and adopt a new identity.[51] Social borders are created and defined by the new economic and social situation, but these relations are under pressure. And nowadays, we are increasingly hearing about tensions between farmers and cattle herders, culminating in conflicts like in eastern Chad and Darfur.

The example from Chad shows how migrants settle in the city. Families who left because of the drought or the violence did not usually leave *en famille*. Departure to a new urban environment from a smaller rural centre to the big city, or directly to the big city is ordered: first the husband, then the sons, and then mother and the young children. Around N'Djamena new neighbourhoods have developed with a distinctly rural character.[52] Some families eventually acquire a legal place to live in the urban environment while others lead a more mobile life, moving each time the legal world claims their place.[53] The migrants' integration is more or less successful but can lead to tension, violence and conflict, as the example of the street children shows. In a certain way, the street child integrates in the landscape of the city and joins street life.[54] The children are in a hierarchical relationship with the richer citizens for whom they do all kinds of work but children find their own niche in the city where they live their own lives, regularly in contact with violence and the world of the police.

These patterns of social relations with the society in which one is the migrant are part of the history of the communication ecology of the social and mobile margins. The tensions in these relations sometimes can and sometimes cannot be settled. An important mechanism for the avoidance of conflicts is to leave for another place, which demands great flexibility on the part of these people.[55] The examples show that this is not always without conflict. In the present situation, there seems to be a tendency towards people withdrawing more often onto their own 'islands' (of identity/ethnicity).[56] Do social borders become fixed and will flexibility disappear from these relations?[57]

This increasing potential for conflict is often explained with the aid of a Malthusian model in which the margins become vast problem regions and xenophobia can be identified. Policy is also inspired by this theory, albeit nuanced. Government policy is often a sealing of borders that results in a decrease in the possibilities for mobility and communication.[58] The political decisions are at odds with the perceptions of the people in the margins vis-à-vis mobility and the real developments and possibilities that they also have as a consequence of the new technological changes.[59]

In research and policy more attention needs to be given to the flexibility that informs these societies in their reactions to change and to the interaction between communication technology and social relations through which ideas about distance and closeness, and the identity and flexibility in relations of people in the social margins are influenced. With the new technological possibilities at hand these questions become increasingly urgent.

In the following section, I philosophize about the possible intervention of mobile telephony in the communication ecology in the social margins, especially the relation with governance, social relations, mobility patterns and people's ideas and identities.

Mobile Communication, an Adventure in Communication Ecology

Developments in mobile telephony are moving rapidly in Africa and the social margins seem to have stepped into the world of wireless communication all of a sudden. Ahmadou and Ousmanou are not the only ones who call us!

Let us first consider the facts about the social margins and telephony in Africa. Urban regions were the first to be connected by this technology. In 1998 Bamenda, the capital of the Grassfields, was introduced to mobile telephony and by 2005 small towns in central Mali and Chad had followed suit. The accompanying advertisement campaigns and the many shops that opened quickly after that have altered the appearance of these small cities. In principle, the people from the hinterlands could use the telephone more easily and as the opening anecdotes show they did so, but on a limited scale. However, the differences between countries and regions are big.[60] Several telecom companies are currently working hard to install wireless telephony.[61]

In comparison with earlier communication technologies, the mobile telephone has special characteristics that do indeed allow associations with the word 'new' to be made. And compared to earlier means of communication, the telephone connects one almost instantaneously: Ahmadou and Ousmanou call when they want to and contact is direct and fast. Telephone technology is not terribly expensive and is accessible to many people. The telecom-companies are pursuing cheaper and cheaper technology, in the expectation that it will become even more accessible. And it is a means of communication that, in contrast to letters, is accessible to the literate as well as the illiterate. These specific characteristics of the technology raise questions about the ways the telephone will change social, cultural, political and geographical patterns, but also how the technology will fit in the communication ecology of the social margins.

Our insights so far are based on recent research into mobile telephony in Africa, especially from the domain of NGOs

and the companies that pay scientific researchers to produce reports[62] that have indicated parallel developments with Europe and the US, such as the creation of a youth culture and the importance of the telephone as an identity marker.[63] In Africa, a telephone culture is also emerging and it now seems impossible to imagine a world without the telephone in social and cultural life.[64] The telephone is demarcating the development of new markets and promoting new economic strategies.[65]

This is, however, only part of the story. Let us now look to the future and consider the changes that might occur within the communication ecology of the margins. I consider three fields for our discussion:

1. The arrival of the big companies: how does mobile telephony technology become established in a country and then reach the margins? What economic and political forces play a role?
2. How is mobility influenced in the margins and how does the social and geographical landscape subsequently change as a result of the expansion of mobile telephony?
3. How are social relations and people's ideas about the world affected?

Communication Ecology and the New Players in the Field: The Telecom Companies

Essential changes in the African landscape accompany the introduction of any new technology. The knowledge related to the technology usually comes from outside Africa and for mobile telephony it lies with the big companies such as Nokia, Ericsson and GSM. Since the liberalization of the telecommunications market, the installation of the mobile network has been entirely in the hands of international businesses such as MTN, Zain and Orange.[66] These companies are largely determining what will happen regarding developments in telecommunications and despite their rhetoric about it being a sustainable business, commercial success is at the top of their agenda. African states are capitalizing on the high profits they are making from the taxes these companies have to pay. This will inevitably lead to new forms of inequality in society but, for the time being, Africa is on the wrong side of the digital gap and it remains to be seen whether the social margins there will be able to fully participate in the technological revolution.[67]

To what extent do these developments influence the power of the state? And to what extent are more possibilities arising for the people in the social margins to manifest themselves? Controlling the media is a way for the state to exercise power.[68] In the rhetoric around telephony, the companies are projecting total freedom. As a top manager of a telecom company in Sudan explained to me, mobile telephony – like the recently launched 'one network' project – renders state borders invalid, 'Isn't that the reality of Africa?' But companies' interactions with this same state do not seem to do justice to this tendency. The moment conflict arose between Sudan and Chad, the company blocked communication between the two countries at the request of both governments. For the moment, it remains very difficult to reach southern Sudan via mobile communication for political reasons. And the conflict between North and South Sudan is making it almost impossible to expand the telephone networks to the south.[69]

Ahmadou in the cattle camp, Mali

Telephone advertisement of a shop in Douentza, Mali

Advertisement of phone company Celtel in the streets of Ndjamena, Chad

Selling of cards and calls combined with hair dresser, Ndjamena, Chad

Selling phone cards in the streets of Ndjamena, employment for jobless Youth, Chad

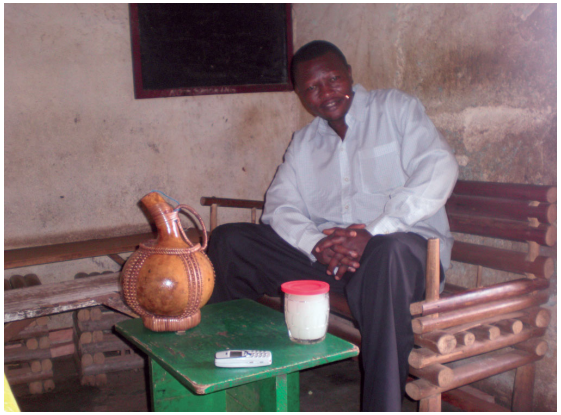
Street child in Ndjamena, Chad, the expectation of the phone (photo taken by Mija Hesseling)

Celtel head office in Ndjamena, Chad

Advertisement of MTN in Bamenda, Cameroon

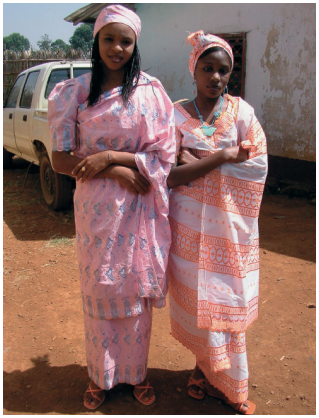
'Telephone jom koyde', Advertisement for a phone workshop Bamenda, Cameroon

Selling calling time on the streets of Bamenda, Cameroon. Young man from the countryside in town



Drinking palm wine in a bar in Bamenda, Cameroon

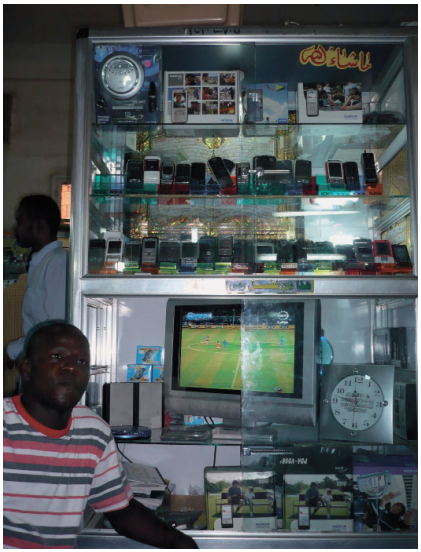
A Fulani child playing with a phone toy, Sabga, Cameroon



Young Fulani women in a village in the Grassfield of Cameroon, longing for modern life

Darfur El Fasher, Billboards of Zain telecompany in El Fasher, Sudan

Old man and the phone in Karima, Sudan (picture taken bij Hisham Bilal)



Shop in Khartoum with phones from Dubai and a TV, Sudan

Workshop, repair of phones in Khartoum, Sudan

On the other hand mobile telephony indeed seems to facilitate for the ordinary citizen new forms of organization and the transgression of boundaries possible. Let us take for instance the organization of protest. Information about politics can be mutually exchanged by phone, sometimes across great distances. Information about revolts, strikes and the like are being exchanged in text messages and elections are being 'organized' by mobile phone.
In Nigeria, the population organized a successful action against telecom companies that were delivering services that were considered to be too expensive,[70] and the 2006 student strikes in Cameroon were partly organized by communicating via mobile phone. On an individual level, as we saw with Ousmanou and Ahmadou other possibilities are explored: borders crossed and life re-organised by means of the mobile phone.

How will new developments in mobile communication change the political landscape of today's authoritarian states in Africa? What consequences will there be for the people in the margins?

Mobility and Telecommunication

Mobile telephony suggests the mobility of people. What happens to the physical mobility of people who have (or want) access to the telephone?

Ahmadou's wish to move to the city has been a reality for many nomads and the urbanization of nomad society is evolving rapidly. I observed a clear example in Mauritania.[71] When I stayed in the small city of Aioun-el-Atrous in Mauritania with a colleague in 2003, an important theme of our conversations was the telephone, not only because we used it so much ourselves but because it seemed to be one of the main emerging economics in the town. It was a way for nomads to keep in contact with their cattle herders and their family in the countryside. Our conclusion that urbanization was being boosted by the telephone did not seem to be unfounded and is confirmed by recent observations. As in the case of Cameroonian Grassfields, where the town has become a point of attraction because of the presence of electricity and the availability of telephone cards, and nomads are increasingly pitching their camps closer to the city to be able to use these facilities. This more intense interaction with the city is leading to an increase in the number of people who want to trade their village life or camp for the city. The town seems to be more and more a landing stage for people who want to benefit from the possibilities of modern technology, and less a refuge from hunger and war.[72]

Is it true that the interaction between different communication technologies, such as mobility, the telephone and roads, is leading to the growth of small cities?[73]

Communication Ecology and Social Relations

Communicating is essential in maintaining relations. This may seem evident, especially in a travelling culture, where flexibility in communication is central in these relations. What, however, does the new phase of communication by mobile telephone mean for relations far away and those close by? Does it influence relations between the migrant and the host-society? What can be said about social tensions and mobile telephony?

Research on mobile telephony and society in the US and Europe suggests a tendency for relations over greater distances to become more accessible and play a more important role in daily life. This is especially true for so-called 'strong' relations. 'Weak' relations, which exist for example with one's neighbour and people close by, are pushed into the background. A similar change could lead to more social tension, as was advanced by Granovetter in 1973.[74] Others point to the emergence of more individually-directed networks.[75]

Will this also be the case for people from the social margins in Africa? The way in which people use the telephone to enter into relations will always have to be related to the specific communication ecology of a society.[76]

The social and mobile margins in which mobility and flexibility are central elements of relations have their specific ways of interpreting relations far away and close by. Research into changes through the use of the Internet in Africa shows that through more intensive communication with people 'at home', migrants from the margins are increasingly entering into a life of 'in-betweenness in which they constantly have to juggle with the faraway and the new environment close by, a situation that is experienced as coercive.[77] Will mobile telephony have a similar effect? The migrant who is a stranger in the urban periphery will have more contact with the village or home, and it might be that he will concentrate less on the place he lives in and on relations close by for this very reason. How does a similar movement in relations change the daily networks that are crucial in situations of crisis and increasing insecurity? What changes can we expect in relations between host and stranger, between autochthones and allochthones? An important question is who will use the telephone in the social margins and for what reason?

Mobility and Flexibility of Mind

Maybe new communication possibilities change relations with far away and close by, but will they also change the perceptions of far away and close by?

The strengthening of social bonds and the reinforcement of relations far away also demonstrate the interweaving of the margins with the world. I do not only receive Ahmadou at the breakfast table, he also has the feeling that I am sitting under the tree alongside him. He can now talk to me at any time of the day. He expresses our new 'nearness' by greeting us each morning in Fulfulde: *'jam waali, a waali e jam?'*[78] while the cows moo in the background.

Ahmadou's ideas about the other world into which he might be able to step have a lot to do with his perception of the new possibilities. Ahmadou, whose mobility was closely connected with the well-being of his cattle, seems to be reorienting his mobility towards the modern world, a world with which he can now communicate on a daily basis. He is one of the richer cattle herders and since the death of his father he has been able to decide what the money he receives for cattle he sells will be spent on. He was one of the first to buy a telephone, which will help him to become the chief of his group. There seems to be a likelihood that he might become *less* mobile but at the same time he will become *more* mobile in his views and opinions and about other possibilities. And in his mind he can travel to the other world if he wants to.

There is another way too that images of the other world penetrate. The different telecom companies' campaigns that compete for African clientele come with promises of the new world. The billboards that Ahmadou sees on his visits to Douentza show him another world. And even the technology of the phone itself lodges an appeal to the other world. As the title of this inaugural address shows, the new technology is translated to their own world. But the *telephon jom koyde* (the telephone that has grown legs) comes from a different world, a world of strange technology. What images of that other world are being formed?[79]

The transmission of ideas will change with the mobile telephone. A travelling culture is not only about people who are mobile and travel but also about the ideas that are travelling with them.[80] Ideas will also travel through communication by telephone so it is very important in our research into these developments that we pay attention to the content of the messages people send and not only to the form.

More communication with others far away and exposure to new ideas and knowledge can lead to the taking on of a new social role in which the margins become a zone of dispute again.

A Field within African Studies

I hope that this exploration in new developments in the communication ecology of social and mobile margins in Africa has raised a similar fascination for these changes as it has done for me. In the coming years, my research will concentrate on the comparative study of social change and the communication ecology of the social and mobile margins. I plan to continue my work in Mali, Chad and Cameroon. The field of research – the mobile social margins of our world – is still in need of our attention because some margins are in danger of becoming more marginal in a world where progress is central. The research will focus on a relatively underexposed part of migration studies in Africa, namely migration within regions.

To map the ecology of communication, collaboration between different disciplines is becoming increasingly important in the complex practice of research. In the proposed programme, there is space for social history and anthropology. Collaboration with literature studies and linguistics, development studies and communication studies will enrich my research. This type of research is ideally organized through dialogue-based interaction, collaboration and cooperation between African and European scientific institutes and scientists. This opens up the possibility to work comparatively in order to extend our knowledge of the dynamics and processes of the societies we are studying.

The ethnography of communication ecology has to be flexible, like those living and working in the social margins and their contact with the new communication technology.[81] The description of this world is necessarily connected to new technology such that film and photographs can be products of research just like books and articles. African Studies is the preeminent scientific field in which this research can find a place.

Why focus on Africa? Recent analysis of the way in which mobile telephony has entered Africa, with the hegemony of global capitalism compelled by the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF and the large role of the business world and

the small role of the African state and African companies, shows that the digital gap has not diminished. Africa is still developing economically and technologically in the world's margins.[82] In science too, Africa remains in the margins. It seems as if a lot of knowledge is being reaped from the continent but what are the benefits for Africa itself? It is a conscious political choice to work in Africa, in an Africa that set out in the world, as Ferguson has explained, in connection, and together with African colleagues.

Word of Thanks

The field of African Studies is finding a place within the Faculty of Arts at Leiden University and the African Studies Centre. I want to thank the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Prof. Wim van der Doel, for his pledge to establish an Africa 'institute' within the faculty where the education of Masters and PhD students and research on Africa would come together and benefit from a joint endeavour in a financial sense too. I gladly devote myself to this future 'institute'. The creation of this professorship, which forms a bridge between the ASC and the Faculty of Arts is an important link for future teamwork. I wish to thank the director of the ASC, Prof. Leo de Haan, once again Prof. Wim van der Doel and the Rector of the University Prof. Paul van der Heijden, for their support for this chair.

Ritual does not exist for nothing and the presentation of an inaugural lecture establishes the professor. But as I said before, if all is well it also confirms the efforts of a lot of other people. The contents of this lecture, which I have almost finished delivering, have been my responsibility alone but without the research programme[83] that I have developed with Francis Nyamnjoh and Inge Brinkman, things would have looked very different. Thank you both for your collegiality and friendship. I hope that this collaboration will continue in the same positive vein in the years ahead.

The ASC's 'Connections and Transformations' research group has also been a source of inspiration for this lecture. Discussions with all the members of the group were not only inspiring but also funny, sometimes even hilarious. Without fun, we cannot live. With my closest colleagues, Rijk van Dijk and Jan-Bart Gewald, I have shared so many sweet and bitter moments that these connections follow as a matter of course. Thank you for your unconditional support.

Many masters have guided me to where I am today. Wouter van Beek will still recognize a lot of his thoughts in my work, but of course I have given them some new twists. Wouter has even endorsed his Dogon with some mobility. Franz von Benda-Beckman kindly imparted governance to me. Gerti Hesseling has always supported me in my years at the ASC and from Gerti I learned that science is a social story and that we have to communicate a lot!

The discussions I have had with PhD candidates that I have supervised both in the Netherlands and in Africa[84] are just as important as my own experiences, but their examples and case studies are theirs and you will hear them when they present their dissertations. I look forward to this and hope that many other students will follow their example and the high standards they have set.

In this inaugural lecture, I have gratefully used my experiences with Africa and African friends who are part of the

social margins of our world. Our worlds have been very different and definitions of the 'other' were often inescapable. I want to thank Ahmadou and Ousmanou for their openness about who they are, and all those other people whose names I have not been able to mention but who live in the social margins and make a living, raise their children there and accept that life is not the same for everyone. I hope they will feel less at ease with this now that the other world is approaching and that there will be more equality in the end. I thank my friends in Mali, Chad and Cameroon for their trust.

Without my colleagues in Africa at CODESRIA, CDP, Lasdel, APAD, Point Sud, CRASH and Langaa, and in Europe at Bayreuth, Uppsala, France (Marseille, Paris), and in AEGIS, Africa research would be a lot less exiting and sociable.

Colleagues at the ASC, we have learned a lot and we are often far from being in agreement on everything. For some of you, my activities have sometimes got too much and I am grateful that you have put the brakes on once in a while. Please continue to do so as I will need these brakes badly in the coming years. Thanks for your continued collegial support.

Being so far away so often, I could not have coped without the endless support I have received on the home front, from family, family-in-law and friends. A special thank goes of course to my parents Arie and Anneke who have followed me from birth and although they did not always like my travelling they never let me down. My brother and his wife, Gijsbert and Linda; my sister, her partner and their beautiful daughter, Marie-Jose, Mark and Lieve: I have always been able to count on you and for that I thank you.

My scientific projects and ideas have always been intertwined with those of Han van Dijk. We are colleagues and buddies and have shared this field and all the emotions that are part of it. Disentangling these trajectories is almost impossible, which has been difficult at times but we have reaped sweet fruits. Our children have had to endure a lot of this scientific madness with a mother who is often away from home and regularly relates the meetings of the day over dinner. And ofcourse to mention here the increasing numbers of calls from Africa at all times of the day and night. Han, Annigje, Gosse and Mette, I am happy that you are there and thank you for giving me continuous inspiration in my life.

Notes

1 *Telefon jom koyde* is the translation of 'mobile phone' in the Fulfulde dialect of Bamenda, Cameroon (Habsatu, January 2006).

2 Under pressure from the World Trade Organization, see Y.Z. Yu'a, 'The New Imperialism and Africa in the New Electronic Village', *Review of African Political Economy* 31, 99 (2004): 11-29.

3 Africa: Telecoms Acceleration, Africa Focus, 17 May 2008. In 2004 Panos reported on the huge gap in the division of mobile telephony between rural and urban areas in Africa. Most companies invested initially in urban areas for commercial reasons. See Panos, 'Telephones in Africa: Mind the Gap', *Panos Media Brief 2004*). For statistics about the spread of mobile telephony by country: www.itu.int/ITUtelecome; and for ICT indications for 2007: www.tinjurl.com/3gvdkl. Recent articles on mobile telephony stress the important social and economic changes this new technology is bringing: S. Corbett, 'Can the Cell Phone Help End Global Poverty?', *New York Times*, 13 April 2008 and 'Nomads at Last: A Special Report on Mobile Telecoms', *The Economist*, 12 April 2008).

4 J. Fabian, *Time and the Other, How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002 [1983]); P. Pels & O. Salemink, *Colonial Subjects, Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

5 Fabian, *Time and the Other*.

6 As analyzed by Jane Guyer. The image of Africa as the traditional in contrast to the modern world has also influenced the historiography of Africa, where Africa is contained in place. See J.I. Guyer, 'Traditions of Invention in Equatorial Africa', *African Studies Review* 39, 3 (1996): 1-28.

7 Africa is defined as a continent of problems where poverty rates are high and poverty is endemic, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the worst in the world, governance structures are problematic, urbanization leads to urban poverty, and conflicts are part of daily reality. Poor citizens are the victims of these crises, living on less than $1 a day in the slums of the big cities or working the eroded lands in the farthest outreaches of the continent. It was decided by the wealthy world when they formulated the Millennium-Development Goals that such poverty should disappear by the end of 2015. The description of the African citizen as a victim and as a target group places Africa in the position of the 'other', on the margins of our world. This rhetoric appeals to the vulnerability of the people in the margins. Cf. A. Kleinman & J. Kleinman, 'The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in our Times', in: A. Kleinman, V. Das & M. Lock (eds), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 1-24) and M. de Bruijn & R. van Dijk, 'Questioning Social Security in the Study of Religion in Africa: The Ambiguous Meanings of the Gift in African Pentecostalism and Islam', in: C. Leutloff-Grandits *et al*. (eds), *Social Security in Religious Networks, Anthropological Perspectives on New Risks and Ambivalences* (Oxford/New York: Berghahn Publishers, 2009, fc)).

8 Following the analysis in Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1982). See also the critique of F. Cooper, 'What is the Concept of Globalisation Good For? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs* 100 (2001): 189-213; D. Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact, World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2002) and I. Brinkman, *A War for People. Civilians, Mobility and Legitimacy in South-East Angola during the MPLA's War for Independence* (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2005).

9 P.T. Zeleza, *The Study of Africa* (vols. 1 & 2), (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2006).

10 J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows, Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham/London, Duke University Press, 2006).

11 'Insecurity as part of the processes and dynamics that shape society' is an important theme in the study of African societies and change. Insecurities are defined in political, social, ecological and economic fields. Cf. M. de Bruijn & H. van Dijk, *Arid Ways, Cultural Understandings of Insecurity in Fulbe Society, Central Mali*, (Amsterdam: Thela Publishers, 1995); S.R. Whyte, *Questioning Misfortune, The Pragmatics of Uncertainty in Eastern Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); A. Mbembe, 'Everything Can Be Negotiated, Ambiguities and Challenges in a Time of Uncertainty', in: B. Berner & P. Trulsson (eds), *Manoeuvring in an Environment of Uncertainty: Structural Changes and Social Action in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, pp. 265-75). The uncertainty/insecurity economy, also labelled 'risk society', has its own dynamics of inequality and hierarchies. See U. Beck, *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

12 For a description of the various forms of migration, especially the understudied rural-rural migration, see H. van Dijk & K. van Til, 'Population Mobility in Africa: An Overview', in: M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk & D. Foeken (eds), *Mobile Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2001, pp. 9-27). See also M. de Bruijn & H. van Dijk, 'Changing Population Mobility in West Africa: Fulbe Pastoralists in Central and South Mali', *African Affairs* 102 (2003): 285-307. These all relate specific forms of migration to marginal areas, such as forced migration as a consequence of climate change, conflict or economic deprivation. Cf. the special journal on forced migration by the Refugee Studies Centre, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, www.fmreview.org; D. Rain, *Eaters of the Dry Season, Circular Labor Migration in the West African Sahel* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999). The label 'refugee' or 'internally displaced person' implies a deviance of the normal situation and policies directed at these groups want to re-establish the normal, i.e. the refugees' return to their home. However, if migration and mobility are part of the social and cultural patterns of a society, then the notion of home becomes highly problematic. See de Bruijn *et al*., *Mobile Africa*; L.H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

13 A.M. Howard & R.M. Shain (eds), *The Spatial Factor in African History. The Relationship of the Social, Material and Perceptual* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

14 The study of transnationalism has contributed significantly to the debate on societies in social space instead of place. For further information about network society, see M. Castells, *The Rise of Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996/2000) and those analysts who put mobility at the centre of the shaping forces of society: J. Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies. Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), J. Clifford, *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997)). The translation of these changes to the local level – the ordinary people in Africa – has found ground within anthropological writings (cf. W. van Binsbergen & R. van Dijk (eds), *Situating Globality, African Agency in the Appropriation of Global Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). The non-spaciality of societies has found ground in the methodologies of social sciences in the debates on multi-spatial research and multi-spatial livelihoods (M. Kaag *et al*., 'Ways Forward in Livelihood Research', in: D. Kalb, W. Pantsers & H. Siebers (eds), *Globalization and Development, Themes and Concepts in Current Research* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishers, 2004, pp. 49-75); L. de Haan & A. Zoomers, 'Development Sociology at the Crossroads of Livelihood and Globalisation', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 94, 3 (2004): 350-62. Gaim Kibreab criticizes the post-modern emphasis on space instead of place in processes of identity formation, arguing that 'place still remains a major repository of rights and membership': see G. Kibreab, 'Revisiting the

Debate on People, Place and Displacement', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, 4 (1999): 384-428. I emphasize that the margins are situated in a place as well as in a social space; people on the margins define their identity in relation to the other who defines the place and space of the margins.

15 H.P. Hahn & G. Klute, *Cultures of Migration, African Perspectives* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007).

16 J. Clifford, 'Traveling Cultures', in: L. Grossberg, C.Nelson & P.A. Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 96-116).

17 Peluso & Ribot indicate the margins as an environment in which people make a living with the specific resources from the margins, as a world in itself: N.L. Peluso & J.C. Ribot, 'A Theory of Access', *Rural Sociology* 68, 2 (2003): 153-81. Street children and homeless people live from and in the margins; cf. M. de Bruijn, 'Street Children in N'djamena, Agency from the Margins', in: M. de Bruijn, R. van Dijk & J-B Gewald (eds), *Strength beyond Structure. Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2007, pp. 263-84); M. de Bruijn & N.S. Djindil, 'Etat nutritionnel et histoire de vie des enfants de la rue a N'djamena', *Psychopathologie africaine* 33, 2 (2005/6): 183-211. For a discussion of the domains of illegality and illicity, see J. Roitman, 'Productivity in the Margins: The Reconstitution of State Power in the Chad Basin', in: V. Das & D. Poole (eds), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Oxford: James Currey, 2004, pp. 191-225).

18 Das & Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins*.

19 S. Falk Moore, 'Law and Social Change: The Semi-autonomous Social Field as an Appropriate Field of Study', in: S. Falk-Moore, *Law as Process: An Anthropological Approach* (London/Henley/Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, pp. 54-81).

20 In the study of the margins, differentiation should be made for gender, generation, age, etc. Life in the social margins may be part of the definition of identity, as it is on the street. See de Bruijn, 'Agency from the Margins'; P.M. Decoudras & A. Lenoble-Bart, 'La rue: le decor et l'enfer', *Politique africaine* 63 (1996): 555-62. Jonna Both defines a separate social space for the girls on the streets of N'djamena, one different from the social space of the boys: J. Both, 'Girls in the Streets of Ndjamena' (working title), MA thesis, fc.).

21 These are those parts of the social world that are different and do not belong to normality. A norm is defined by those in power within the dominant governance structures such as the State. See Das & Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins*; K. Bales, *Disposable People, New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999); P. Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities, The Modern Plagues* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999).

22 De Bruijn *et al.*, *Mobile Africa*.

23 M. de Bruijn, 'Mobility and Society in the Sahel: An Exploration of Mobile Margins and Global Governance', in: Hahn & Klute, *Cultures of Migration*, pp. 109-28.

24 For risk positions; see Beck, *Risk Society.*

25 Research on social space is not geographically bounded. As Clifford stated in 'Traveling Cultures', place is a definition of the researcher and not of the culture that is being researched. 'In much traditional ethnography (…) the ethnographer has localized what is actually a regional/national/global nexus, relegating to the margins a 'culture's external relations and displacements' (p. 100); and 'why not focus on any culture's farthest range of travel while also looking at its centers, its villages, its intensive field sites?' (p. 101). See also A. Gupta & J. Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations, Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997) and note 13.

26 De Bruijn & van Dijk, 'Changing Population Mobility' and *Ibid.*, 'Moving People; Pathways of Fulbe Pastoralists in the Hayre-Seeno Area, Central Mali', in: M. de Bruijn, H. van Dijk, M. Kaag & K. van Til (eds), *Sahelian Pathways, Climate Change and Society in Central and South Mali*

(African Studies Centre, Research Report no. 78, 2005, pp. 247-79).

27 M. de Bruijn & H. van Dijk, 'The Multiple Experiences of Civil War in the Guera Region of Chad 1965-1990', *Sociologus* 57, 1 (2007): 61-98.

28 First results of PhD research, Walter Nkwi, ASC/Universiteit van Buea, Research Reports 2007/2008 and personal communication).

29 L. & W. Ngwa (eds), *From Dust to Snow, Bushfaller* (Princeton, NJ: Horeb Communications, 2006); F.B. Nyamnjoh & P. Konings, *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

30 H.A. Horst & D. Miller, *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication* (London/New York: Berg Publishers, 2006). This is an ethnographic description of the relationship between communication and poverty. I use the concept 'communication ecology' as a metaphor and refer to research that looks into the relationship between the environment and society.

31 T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment, Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

32 De Bruijn & van Dijk proposed the concept of 'pathways' to indicate the manner in which people give form to their lives in relation to their changing natural environment. See M. de Bruijn & H. van Dijk, 'Introduction: Climate and Society in Central and South Mali', in: M. de Bruijn *et al*. (eds), *Sahelian Pathways*, (Leiden: ASC 2005, 1-16).

33 Cf. E. Croll & D. Parkin, 'Anthropology, the Environment and Development', in: E. Croll & D. Parkin, *Bush Base: Forest Farm, Culture, Environment and Development* (London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 3-11); de Bruijn & van Dijk *Arid Ways*. See also de Bruijn *et al*., *Strength beyond Structure*.

34 N.E.J. Oudshoorn & T.J. Pinch (eds), *How Users Matter. The Co-construction of Users and Technology*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003); S. Woolgar & K.Grint, *The Machine at Work: Technology, Work and Organization* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); J. Law (ed.), *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination* (London: Routledge, 1991); G.A. Gow & R.K. Smith, *Mobile and Wireless Communications: An Introduction* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2006). The relationship between society and technology builds upon the existing historical forms of these relations.

35 L. Waverman, M. Meschi & M. Fuss, 'The Impact of Telecoms on Economic Growth in Developing Countries, Moving the Debate Forward', Vodafone Policy Paper Series, No. 3 (2005); C.C. Okigbo, & E. Festus Eribo (eds), *Development and Communication in Africa* (Lanham: Ishemo Shubi, 2004), 'Culture and Historical Knowledge in Africa: A Cabralian Approach', *Review of African Political Economy* 99 (2004) 65-82.

36 The relationship between technological progress and development is complex and relates to new social inequalities (cf. F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* (London: Zed Books, 2005); W. van Binsbergen, 'Can ICT Belong in Africa, or is ICT Owned by the North Atlantic Region?', in: van Binsbergen & van Dijk, *Situating Globality,* 107-46; S. Wyatt & F. Henwood (eds), *Technology and Inequality: Questioning the Information Society* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

37 An example is the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) in The Hague, the Netherlands, which was founded eleven years ago and is financed by the Netherlands Ministry of International Cooperation. Its main aim is to research the possible contribution of ICT to development. See also F. Ebam Etta, F. & S. Parvyn-Wamahiu (eds), *Information and Communication Technologies for Development in Africa* (Ottawa/Dakar: International Development Research Centre & CODESRIA, 2003)).

38 Celtel/Zain in Sudan': M. de Bruijn & I. Brinkman, 'The Nile Connection: Mobile Telephony in Sudan', draft report for Zain (2008); cf. Yu'a, 'New Imperialism'.

39 'The past in the present and the present in the past'.

History/the past informs our thinking and actions in the present, i.e. it follows certain patterns. See M. Chapman, M. McDonald & E. Tonkin, *History and Ethnicity*, ASA Monographs, No. 27 (London: Routledge, 1989).

40 L. Gitelman & G.B. Pingree, 'Introduction: What's New About New Media?', in: L. Gitelman & G.B. Pingree (eds), *New Media, 1740–1915* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, pp. xi-xxii).

41 Transhumance as a Ritual. See A.M. Bongfligioli, *Dudal, Histoire de famille et histoire de troupeau chez un groupe de Wodaabe du Niger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

42 See de Bruijn & Brinkman, 'Nile Connection'. Chapter 6 explains how the telephone in Juba is more an expectation that a reality.

43 What role technology plays in development in relation to other factors is, of course, hard to discover. See R.E. Kraut *et al.*, *Computers, Phones and the Internet, Domesticating Information Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

44 Historical research on communication technology in African societies is relatively underdeveloped. Recently some research programmes were started at the Africa Studies Centre in Leiden: W. Nkwi, 'Communication Technology and Society in Cameroonian Grassfields' Research Proposal, (Leiden: ASC, 2008); J-B. Gewald, 'I.C.E. in Africa: A Research Programme' (Leiden: ASC, 2007). For more information, www.ascleiden.nl); cf. D.R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

45 See F. von Benda-Beckmann, K. von Benda-Beckmann & H. Marks (eds), *Coping with Insecurity: An 'Underall' Perspective on Social Security in the Third World*, *Focaal* 22/23 special issue (1994).

46 De Bruijn & van Dijk, *Arid Ways*, Chapter 4.

47 F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2006).

48 L. Pelckmans, 'Negotiating the Memory of Fulbe Hierarchy among Mobile Elite Women', in: de Bruijn *et al.*, *Strength beyond Structure,* pp. 285-311.

49 This model was developed by W.A. Shack, 'Open Systems and Closed Boundaries: The Ritual Process of Stranger Relations in New African States', in: W.A. Shack & E.P. Skinner, *Strangers in African Societies*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 37-47). See also G.E. Brookes, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

50 The stranger-host model helps to explain relations between nomads and the outside world. See M. de Bruijn & H. van Dijk, 'Introduction: Peuls et Mandingues: Dialectique des constructions identitaires', in: M. de Bruijn & H. van Dijk (eds), *Peuls et Mandingues: Dialectique des constructions identitaires* (Paris/Leiden: Karthala & the African Studies Centre, 1997, pp. 13-29); M. de Bruijn, H. van Dijk & W. van Beek, 'Antagonisme et solidarité: Les relations entre Peuls et Dogons du Mali central', in: de Bruijn & van Dijk, *Peuls et Mandingues*, 243-65; M. de Bruijn, 'Rapports interethniques et identité: L'exemple des pasteurs peuls et des cultivateurs humbeebe au Mali central', in: Y. Diallo & G. Schlee (eds), *L'ethnicité peule dans des contextes nouveaux* (Paris: Karthala, 2000, 15-37).

51 M. de Bruijn, 'The Pastoral Poor: Hazard, Crisis and Insecurity in Fulbe Society in Central Mali', in: V. Azarya *et al.* (eds), *Pastoralists under Pressure* (Leiden: Brill, 1999, 285-312).

52 M. de Bruijn, 'Neighbours on the Fringes of a Small City in Post-war Chad', in: P. Konings & D. Foeken (eds), *Crisis and Creativity, Exploring the Wealth of the African Neighbourhood* (Leiden: Brill, 2006, 211-30).

53 These people can be called peripatetics, see J.C. Berland & A. Rao, *Customary Strangers: New Perspectives on Peripatetic Peoples in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia* (Westport CT, Praeger Publishers 2004); M. de Bruijn, 'From Pastoralist to Peripatetic: The Fulbe and

Environmental Stress in Central Mali', in: B. Benzing & B. Herrmann (eds), *Exploitation and Overexploitation in Societies Past and Present* (Munster: Lit-Verlag, 2003, 357-65).

54 De Bruijn, 'Agency from the Margins'; Both 'Streetgirls'.

55 See de Bruijn & van Dijk *Sahelian Pathways*; J. Gallais, *Pasteurs et Paysannes du Gourma: La condition sahelienne* (Paris: CNRS, 1975).

56 F.B. Nyamnjoh, 'Ever-Diminishing Circles. The Paradoxes of Belonging in Botswana', in: M. de la Cadena & O. Starn (eds), *Indigenous Experience Today* (Oxford: Berg, 2008, 305-32).

57 Increasing economic and social insecurity influences urban life in Africa, where social relations are described as being under stress. See J. Bouju & M. de Bruijn, 'Introduction: Une violence sociale ordinaire. Le développement social de l'Afrique en question', *Apad Bulletin* 27 & 28 (2007), 1-13; A. Marie (ed.), *L'Afrique des individus, itinéraires citadins dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, 1997). With the increasing power of social borders, it is expected that communication ecology will change. Mobility may turn into a strategy of retreating into one's own world, i.e. social margin.

58 See de Bruijn, 'Mobility and Society'.

59 'Immigration remains a contentious political issue. It is compounded by its perceived link with crime and increasingly with terrorism since Sept 11, 2001. Xenophobic manifestations, however, ignore historical immigration patterns and their benefits for recipient states', Nyamnjoh, '*Insiders and Outsiders*', 11.

60 Statistics for 2007: Cameroon: total phone subscribers: 3,267 million, 19.68 per 100 inhabitants, effective teledensity 24.45; Chad: 479,000 subscribers: 4.78 per 100 inhabitants, effective teledensity 8.52; Mali: 2.568 million subscribers; 20.81 per 100 inhabitants, effective teledensity, 20.13 (Africa Telecommunication/ICT indicators 2008; ITU (International Telecommunication Union).

61 The governments of these countries may include a clause in their contract with the companies that they also have to spread telephony to the remote areas (interviews in Chad, OTRT, Office Tchadienne de réglementation des telecommunications, April 2008).

62 See Waverman, 'Impact of Telecoms'.

63 Cf. G. Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006). For an analysis of phone culture in the West; see also J.E. Katz, *Magic in the Air. Mobile Communication and the Transformation of Social Life* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

64 See Katz, *Magic in the Air* and Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture* for a description of the phone culture in Western societies, and H.P. Hahn & L. Kibora, 'The Domestication of the Mobile Phone: Oral Society and New ICT in Burkina Faso', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, 1 (2008): 87-109, which describes the phone culture from the perspective of consumption with the phone as a consumption item. D.J. Smith, 'Cell Phones, Social Inequalities and Contemporary Culture in Nigeria', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 40, 3 (2006): 496-523 is an analysis of phone culture in Nigeria and refers especially to the political domain. In all these studies, the rapid acceptation of the mobile phone is emphasized.

65 T. Molony, 'Trading Places in Tanzania: Mobility and Marginalisation in a Time of Travel-saving Technologies', in: M. de Bruijn, F.B. Nyamnjoh & I. Brinkman (eds), *New Social Spaces: Mobility and Technology in Africa* (working title) fc.

66 Yu'a, 'New Imperialism'.

67 Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media*.

68 See A. Chéneau-Loquay (ed.), *Enjeux des technologies de la communication en Afrique. Du téléphone à internet* (Paris: Karthala, 2000) and A. Chéneau-Loquay (ed.), *Mondialisation et technologies de la communication en Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

69 See de Bruijn & Brinkman, 'Nile Connection', and interviews in Chad, April 2008 with personnel from Celtel, an important telecom provider in Chad. Also interviews with the Minister of Telecommunication (OTRT, Office

Tchadienne de reglementation des telecommunication) in Ndjamena.

70 E. Obadare, 'Playing Politics with the Mobile Phone in Nigeria: Civil Society, Big Business and the State', *Review of African Political Economy* 33, 107 (2006): 93-111.

71 Over the past twenty years, Mauritania has seen the rapid urbanization of its nomadic societies. See K. van Til, 'Neighbourhood (re)Construction and Changing Identities in Mauretania from a Small Town Perspective', in: Foeken & Konings, *Crisis and Creativity*, 230-50.

72 Small towns are becoming part of an intriguing dynamic related to the new possibilities that ICT offers.

73 Small towns in Africa are relatively understudied but see J. Baker, *Small Town Africa Studies in Rural-urban Interaction* (Uppsala: SIAS, 1990) and Foeken. & Konings, *Crisis and Creativity*.

74 Special report on 'Mobile Telecoms; Nomads at Last', *The Economist,* 12 April 2008. For more details on this theory, see M. Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78, 6 (1973): 1360-80. Weak ties are essential for the functioning of the social fabric because too much emphasis on strong ties may lead to isolation, see *Ibid*., 'The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited', *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 210-33. The relationship between weak and strong ties in a social network is linked to social class, level of education and social hierarchies. Granovetter's theory invites reflection on the effects of mobile phones in the social margins. The hypothesis is that the disappearance of weak ties will lead to a potential increase in social conflict.

75 Castells, *Network Society*, and S. Vertovec, 'Cheap Calls: The Social Glue of Migrant Transnationalism', *Global Networks* 4, 2 (2004): 219-24.

76 H. Horst & D. Miller, 'From Kinship to Link-up. Cell Phones and Social Networking in Jamaica', *Current Anthropology* 46, 5 (2005).

77 F.B. Nyamnjoh, 'Images of Nyongo amongst Bamenda Grassfielders in Whiteman Kontri', *Citizenship Studies* 9, 3 (2005): 241-69.

78 With these exchanges on the telephone, Ahmadou consolidates our financial relationship.

79 Bushfallers in Cameroon leave with big dreams about the other continent and hope that their dreams will be realized. See Ngaw & Ngaw, *Bushfallers* and F.B. Nyamnjoh, 'The Notions of Bushfalling and Bushfallers in the Cameroonian Diaspora', Draft paper (2008).

80 Pelckmans, 'Negotiating Memory'; de Bruijn *et al*., *Mobile Africa* and also S. Ponzanesi & D. Merolla (eds), *Migrant Cartographies, New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005). This collection of articles emphasizes the arts as an expression of migrant culture.

81 Virtual research techniques, mobile telephony and the Internet are changing research practices (L. Pelckmans, 'Anytime and the Other: The Mobile Phone is (re-)Shaping Anthropological Fields and Research Contexts', in: de Bruijn, Nyamnjoh & Brinkman, *New Social Spaces*, fc.

82 Yu'a 'New Imperialism'; 'Africa and the Mobile Phone: It's Not All Good News', *Financial Times*, 23 November 2006; The authors indicate that technological knowledge in African institutes is lagging behind that in the rest of the world.

83 'Mobile Africa Revisited: A Comparative Study of the Relationship between New Communication Technologies and Social Spaces (Chad, Mali, Cameroon, Angola), WOTRO/NWO Research Programme (W 01.67.2007.014), 2008-2013).

84 Annemarie Bouman, Kiky van Til, Lotte Pelckmans, Nakar Djindil, Walter Nkwi, Ellen Blommaert, Laurens Nijzink, Laguerre Djerandi, Ousmanou Ahmadou, Doreen Setume, Samuel Ntewusu. I look forward to work with Djimet Seli, Richard Akum, Veronica Tchivela Pedro, and Naffet Keita (post Doc) in the WOTRO project 'Mobile Africa Revisited' starting in September 2008.

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Prof. Mirjam de Bruijn is a social anthropologist. She was awarded her PhD (cum laude) in 1995 for a study of nomadic societies and drought in the Sahel and has since received grants for research programmes on the relationship between mobility and changes in arid lands, climate change, and conflict and social change in West and Central Africa, especially in Chad, Cameroon and Mali. Since 2005 she has been coordinating a research programme involving various African research institutes on the local dynamics of conflict in West Africa. She became a senior researcher at the African Studies Centre in Leiden in 2001, where she is now head of one of the research groups. She was appointed director of the Research Masters in African Studies at Leiden University's Faculty of Arts in 2007 and in June 2007 was nominated Professor of African Studies at Leiden University. In 2008 she was awarded a NWO/WOTRO grant for a five-year research project that will investigate the relationship between communication, mobility and marginality in various African countries.

'My research (since 1987) has primarily concerned people's ways of life and the changes in Africa's remote areas. The main themes of my research are mobility, nomadism, insecurity and uncertainty, and agency. My research has concentrated on Mali, Cameroon and Chad and always been in collaboration with colleagues and students in Africa and elsewhere. The research proposed in this lecture is a continuation of previous research and will offer a comparative study of social change and communication ecology – from the talking drum to the mobile phone – in the social and mobile margins. This field of research, namely the mobile social margins of our world, still needs our attention because some margins are in danger of becoming more marginal in a world where progress is central. And the study of migration within African regions will also be highlighted. Mobile telephony is a fascinating strating point for studying the relationship between communication and societal change.'