Connecting and Change in African Societies: Examples of "Ethnographies of Linking" in Anthropology[1]

Mirjam de Bruijn *African Studies Centre, Leiden University*
Rijk van Dijk *African Studies Centre, Leiden University*

Abstract: Africa has been witnessing rapid changes in the social landscape over the past ten years. Processes of globalization and the advancement of new technologies have been impacting on local social networks significantly. This paper moves away from an analysis of networks as defining social space, towards an ethnography of linking and connections. What does the linking entail and how does this encompass moments of change? We consider two linking technologies of different natures—the mobile phone and the passport-to-life—and assess what these technologies link. Central in this analysis is how linking connections possess agency in producing social change.

Keywords: linking, connections, agency, social change, ICT, passports-to-life, Mali, Cameroon, Botswana

Résumé : L'Afrique connaît des changements rapides de son paysage social depuis 10 ans. Les processus de la mondialisation et le progrès des nouvelles technologies ont un impact significatif sur les réseaux sociaux locaux. Cet article s'éloigne d'une analyse des réseaux comme facteurs de définition de l'espace social, au profit d'une ethnographie des liens et des relations. Qu'exige la création de relations et comment cela intègre-t-il des moments de changement? Nous observons deux technologies de mise en relation de natures différentes – le téléphone portable et le « certificat de santé avec mention de contamination ou non au VIH », appelé passport-to-life au Botswana – et évaluons ce que ces technologies servent à relier. Au centre de cette analyse, nous cherchons ce que les liens de relation possèdent d'agentivité dans la production du changement social.

Mots-clés : liens, relations, agentivité, changement social, TIC, certificat de santé avec mention de contamination ou non au VIH, Mali, Cameroun, Botswana

Introduction

We would like to start our analysis of linking technologies, which bring about social change, with the image of the bridge. A bridge connects, but it does much more. It links different places and different people, and creates new opportunities for the building of relationships economically, socially, politically and culturally. We problematize any static notion of the bridge: as a link it appears to have a life of its own in the way it shapes relationships between land and water, between the various people on either side, between the various economic endeavours of trade and transport, and between the everyday and levels of (political, military and civic) means of control and supervision of a population. There is not only "life in the link," but an agency of the link—what it represents and what it does to people and societies—that transforms through time.

It is for this reason that we introduce the idea of the social life of linkages, and of the connections they forge. The metaphor of the bridge helps us to understand how the linkages between people are important because they appear to have a transformative power in their relations. By invoking Appadurai's (1986) social life of things, we can understand that by emphasizing the thing-like nature of linkages, these connections become subjected to the meaning that people attribute to them in the context of human transactions and motivations. By exploring the social life of links and connections—in the way they generate histories and develop relations and transactions—we are able to understand how social transformations occur from a particular and new perspective that moves away from a static definition that takes connections as inert, unchanging and frozen in time. The central question in this article is how can we perceive social change through the lens of the social life of connections?

In our search for exploring processes of social transformation from a connections perspective, we are moving explicitly towards understanding the significance of

linking. In processes of linking, of making new connections and of the decisions that people are making at these moments, we can see new constellations of power coming into being and social transformations taking place. The connection has a bearing on the people concerned, which means that we move beyond network theory—in which agency is fully placed in the people who produce connections—and put the connection at the centre of the analysis. It is primarily the connection that makes a new constellation emerge, and it is not so much the "dots" in the network that are being connected. It shifts the attention for agency (cf. Jackson and Karp 1990) from the ones that are connecting to the linking itself by emphasizing a perspective that takes linking as a paradigmatic point of departure.

We will attempt to understand this by using two examples that demonstrate how connections and social relations transform together through the introduction of new linking technologies. We will explore and discuss two connecting devices, for example two objects that display the capacity to link people to wider networks of exchange and relationships. However in the process we will also demonstrate their capacity to transform the nature, significance and intensity of these relations and thus appear to have some form of agency of their own.

The first example discusses the recent introduction of the mobile phone in two areas in Africa: the Sahel zones in Mali and the North Western Province of Cameroon. Exploring the linkages in their various (social, cultural and economic) meanings becomes a more challenging idea when we consider the changes in communication technologies that we have observed over the past 20 years in Africa and beyond. Today, telephone companies are reaching the most marginal areas of Africa (in terms of geography, infrastructure and politics), aiming to establish new connections. It is through the introduction of this information and communication technology that Africa and African societies have become connected globally in new and unprecedented ways, thereby creating fresh fields of social interaction.

The second example discusses a tool that has been introduced to control the spread of HIV/AIDS in parts of Southern Africa (particularly in Botswana): the so-called "passport-to-life." Passports-to-life are documents that record a person's AIDS status and their enrolment in behavioural change programmes that connect people to new biopolitical means of population and health control. In other words, while the passport communicates a person's status, it links the person to a world of global health-related intervention policies that have become significant in many places in Africa. Like the mobile phone, the passport-to-life is changing people's relational intimacies as it connects people to new forms of communication (in this case the opening up of discussions on sexuality, HIV/AIDS and the body), modern institutions that monitor people's health (testing and counselling centres) and new forms of power that discipline one's personal and sexual behaviour. The recording of people's AIDS status connects them to new fields of social relations but at the same time transforms these relations in the process.

These examples will demonstrate how the transformative power of connections is particularly relevant in the study of African societies in today's age of globalization. The mobile phone and the passport-to-life are connecting devices that change relations between people, but they are tools that are the product—and producers—of a world of global interactions. The ubiquity of connections, also in African societies, has become phenomenal and has led to a situation where hardly any group in society is untouched by a wide diversity of connections in terms of communication technologies, phones, roads, the Internet and electricity. We argue that we can even speak of a post-global phase in the transformative process of the omnipresence of connections and the social changes these produce, and which we are only just beginning to unravel.

We propose an ethnography of linking and linking technologies in this article. Central in such an ethnography is how new devices of connectivity, in relation to all other linking technologies, lead societies and individuals into new relations. Can we see an intensification of old patterns and hierarchies that are now extending to a wider social space? Or is there an intensification of connections shaping relations and making the lives of individuals deeper and more intimately related to wider social fields or forms of power?

The Post-Global Phase of Omnipresent Connectivity: A New Ethnography?

The ethnography of connections or linkages clearly relates to the occurrence of processes of globalization. Although globalization is not to be viewed as a process of today (cf. Cooper 2001), we cannot deny that there has been a range of remarkable "intensifications" of the global linked to the local over the past decades, with the enormous increase in transnational travel, mobility, the unprecedented rise of information and communication technologies (particularly the mobile phone), the significance of new patterns of consumption, and the flow of global images and ideas of modern social relationships through all sorts of media. One can no longer think of the local without the global in Africa, and indeed many local realities are being shaped and reshaped in view of new global connections.

In rural and urban areas alike, social realities are increasingly being confronted with an intensification of connections in which groups of different socio-economic status, gender or age are becoming closely connected. Villagers in rural areas of Africa are now connected with overseas migrants, and money, objects and ideas can circulate easily and at great speed. Therefore in addition to the ways in which African settings were connected to an outside world in the past, a new and highly vibrant tapestry of connections through the media, modern means of travel and communication and a wide-ranging exchange of goods and styles have come into being.

The realization of an abundance of connections in Africa is reinforced by ongoing developments in infrastructure. The building of roads, railway lines and bridges, the process of electrification, the improved coverage of media and communication technologies, and the increasing activities among international organizations, NGOs and faith-based organizations are all part of the expansion of the infrastructure. Unfortunately in areas of conflict and violence, this expansion of infrastructure may have been (temporarily) brought to a standstill but even in war-torn areas the remarkable entry of the mobile telephone and the infrastructure it requires has not gone unnoticed.

The combined process of intensification of connections and the expansion of infrastructure and linking technologies is not only enabling each other to develop but also forms the basis of the notion of a post-global society in Africa. The creation of a globalized society has been realized. The multitude and omnipresence of connections is a fact and has become part of the experience of almost everyone in Africa. Connections are no longer scarce but are at the centre of the social fabric in many African societies. We propose studying these connections for the very reason that so much of the social reality of today is being shaped this way.

The conceptual study of globalization as it has developed in anthropology since the 1990s (van Binsbergen et al. 2006) has made a revisit of the anthropological object of study unavoidable. In anthropology, the study of society used to be grounded in places and in a globalizing world this premise has been questioned. For example, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) no longer situate the object of study in place but in space, Appadurai invented the term "scapes" instead of place, and the famous work of Olwig and Hastrup (1997), *Siting Culture*, redefined the object again into nodal points of social relating that link the local and the global, with the field being situated in various sorts of relations. Here we take this discussion further, going beyond the nodal points perspective. Networks and the relationship between the local and the global are new fields of study but has the anthropological endeavour escaped its fascination with place and locality?

Within network studies, the study of linkages in networks was developed by Granovetter (1973) who proposed the idea of strong and weak ties that keep society going. Strong linkages are, for instance, people who are closely related, for example good friends and family, while weak linkages are the occasional linkages with neighbours or the shop owners where one buys bread. Granovetter suggested that the weak ties might be more important for the smooth running of society than strong ones, although people are inclined to give more value to their strong ties. With a focus on ties, Granovetter situated research in the linkages or relations between people. The question in an ethnography of linking would be to consider how these ties come into being and how they influence the social construct of society.

A recent development in social science theories is to put mobility, instead of being "settled," at the centre of the analysis (cf. Castells 2004; de Bruijn et al. 2001; Urry 2007). As a result, an anthropology of mobility has emerged within the discipline of anthropology (Salazar 2010). In this mobility paradigm, the object of study is the interrelationship between culture and place by conceptualizing the relationship between culture and patterns of (im)mobility and (in)flexibility. The focus of research then becomes the linking, the mobility per se, and how mobility shapes relations. The study of mobility distinguishes geographical mobilities and social mobilities. However if we adapt the idea of studying connections and the social life of these connections, mobilities also become embedded in ideas, imaginaries and in non-physical displacement. An example of such connections is the *Branchement* study by Amselle (2001), in which he follows a ritual in its social life. Some studies on migration have tried to grasp the itinerary of migrants (cf. Schapendonk 2011) and studies of transnationalism (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002) have defined a transnational habitus (Vuorela 2002) which indicates a new pattern or even style in the way in which people learn to deal with the formation of connections over extended distances of space and time. Yet the study of places at both ends of the transnational remains the focus of research in all these examples.

The study of mobility, transnationality and connections seems to qualify the study of geographical borders and social boundaries. These fields of study are associated with notions of freedom and flexibility, as borders and boundaries appear to have the capacity not only of demarcation and closure, but of connection as well. However, the study of mobility is also a study of immobility, and the study of connections should include the study of

disconnections. The study of borders and borderlands might function as an interesting mirroring point. Studying borders seems to relate to a fixity of social and geographical space where the linking occurs and is rendered meaningful. And the immobility of borders could be relevant for understanding how they produce connections of a specific kind and thus bring into relief the condition of mobility and flexibility of the linking technologies that are the focus of our analysis.

The connections that we define also refer to the nodal points of Olwig and Hastrup (1997) that are seen as the point of encounter between the local and the global, also including contact zones (such as borderlands) and points of communication. These nodal points create a social life of their own because of the different dimensions they can adopt. In an ethnography of linking, the itinerary between the local and the global, between places of contact, between the visible and the invisible, and between mobility and immobility becomes the focus of research. In conventional studies, these are seen as a no-man's-land, beyond research, while in mobility studies the in-between is considered as the centre. As mentioned above, in discussions about migration, the flexibility of the movement itself is often not questioned and in cases of network analysis, the links between the dots often escape serious analysis. However we suppose that it is in these itineraries or in the linkages themselves that the social reality is hidden. This leads us to a discussion of the control of the connections, as these are also the spaces where supervision is difficult. We need to understand what is going on here, either in terms of the technology of connecting or the life of the technologies that are making the connections.

Such an ethnography of connections is still in its infancy. The ethnography of linking technologies starts with an in-depth understanding of individuals and families and moves on to the concrete lives of people and instances of connecting. The example of the bridge (above) shows that we have to follow the life of the connections—where do they go in fields of social interaction? It is the appropriation of the linkage that then becomes central in the methodology and analysis.

Appropriation implies conscious decisions and the connection thus becomes a form of social capital, and potentially an element that could improve lives, although people also become aware of dangers, new inequalities or the depletion of (financial) resources. It relates to rules of access to technologies, the economy of the linking and the characteristic of the linking technology; a bridge for example differs from a mobile phone in all these aspects in its form of connecting. The linking will also influence the content of the relations, for example the meanings given, and feelings about it by the people concerned. The two case studies on the mobile phone and passports-to-life are an attempt to show the way a linking ethnography can take shape. Both are similar in the way they link local to global worlds, how they communicate aspects of private lives to wider domains of social life, how they indicate identities and social relations and how they are part of a technologized modality of shaping social life, yet differ in the nature of the domains they address. Whereas at first glance putting these examples of linking technologies together in a comparative study does not seem an obvious thing to do, it is precisely the way in which they differ that makes clear how forceful linking technologies can become in shaping social life. The passports-to-life are linking a world of health interventions and personal identities to wider schemes of health policies, behavioural change programs and global initiatives in the fight against AIDS. The passport communicates aspects of one's personal life to higher circles of control and interventions, while from higher circles of policy-making and health interventions models for appropriate, responsible behaviour trickle downward in an intricate manner in every layer of social life in a country like Botswana. This makes for a good comparison with the power of the mobile phone, which likewise trickles and penetrates many layers of social life to nestle in intimate social relations while shaping these and communicating important aspects of these domains to wider circles of social interaction. The force of linking is directly related to the force of shaping social life, and although the passport makes this clear for the domain of health and the mobile phone for the domain of communication, what brings them together is the force of this shaping that is embedded in the linking of different layers of social reality that these devices provide.

The Ethnography of Linking Technologies: The Mobile Phone

In recent work on mobile communication,[2] both network analysis and space analysis have been central. In this new school of thought, the focus is on people's relationships with communication technology in the past and in the present. One of the central questions in this field is how relations between people change with advances in new communication technology, especially the mobile phone and computers. The density of networks, the frequency of phone calls and the way the phone is perceived are central. Some authors ascribe a lot of power to change to the mobile phone and even see this as the start of a "phone culture" (Goggin 2006; Katz 2006). Indeed the mobile phone is being hailed for its ability to connect even

the most remote areas where the infrastructure is still to be developed. It could become the linking gadget per se, and is already referred to as the umbilical cord of our society, not only linking but also intimately tying people (*The Economist* 2008). In a study on mobile phone "use/appropriation" in Jamaica, Horst and Miller (2005) propose a kinship analysis of phone use. They move away from the phone as pure technology by understanding it as a social thing, in which the social life of people can be discovered. They propose a methodology in which the phone is (literally) opened and people are questioned about who they talk to and about what. This information offers insight into the networks and relationships involved and is leading to an understanding of the new contacts people are making as a result of the phone and the content of messages, and comes close to a social understanding of the linking itself. As a result, Horst and Miller (2006) have coined the term "anthropology of communication."

In our study of mobile phones, mobility and marginality in several remote regions in Africa, we are trying to understand how mobile phones connect and the transformations or changes that are happening.[3] The economically and politically marginal areas of Africa can now be connected (Skuse and Cousins 2007).[4] The study of mobile phone appropriation in these regions, where the Internet is still scarce or not accessible at all and where access roads are poor, we see the need to develop a grounded ethnography of communication in which an understanding of the connections is central. This research links mobile phone communication to the history of communication in these areas and to the various existing linking technologies, to understand the communication or connectivity ecology of a society. Through a historical ethnographic approach, the meaning of these technologies, mutual appropriation and all that happens in-between the linking can be discovered (cf. de Bruijn 2008; Panagos and Horst 2006; Tacchi et al. 2003).

How is the mobile phone imposing new connections and how are the inhabitants of these regions appropriating the new possibilities for linking? And how does this linking lead to social transformations in society? In transnational studies, the transformative power of the mobile phone is especially ascribed to the new ways of linking and thus to an intensification of certain relations to the detriment of others. The mobile phone is sometimes called the social glue that keeps migrant societies together (Vertovec 2004), while in other cases the ambiguity of the intensification of this device of long-distance relations is emphasized (Nie et al. 2002). Below we will explore these questions for Anglophone Cameroonian society and a herders group in Central Mali that have both always been part and parcel of migration histories. In short, they are cultures of migration and mobility (Hahn and Klute 2007).

Cameroon

The first case presented here refers to the Grassfields of Anglophone Cameroon. This is a region that can be depicted as being marginal for both political and economic reasons and has known a long history of migration and mobility. Under colonial rule, the Grassfields were the labour reservoir for the plantation economy, but we can trace mobility back to before the 20th century when the political organization of the region, combined with its ecological particularities, made travel and displacement a common feature of villages, individuals and even kingdoms.[5] It would seem that the recent mobilities entailing migration to the United States and Europe are an extension of the mobility cultures that have always been common in this region.[6] In such a mobile society one could imagine that communication is at the heart of society. The social fabric of society is one that consists of linking technologies from early travel to the latest development: the mobile phone.

Let us consider the story of a middle-class family in Bamenda town in Anglophone Cameroon that is "linked up" in the world. This family is globalized in its thinking, in its choice of TV programmes and clothes, and in the fact that they are physically spread all over the world. They comprise all the aspects of family life in the world of today that have been described in articles on the advent of "modernism" or the local in the global. Theirs is a world of post-globalism in that they are exposed to an omnipresence of connections:

> In December 2009, I (Mirjam) am observing Suzanne,[7] the eldest sister, as she is standing outside her beautiful house in the colonial neighbourhood of town and was phoning her youngest sister who is studying in the United States. She is planning to send her eldest son to the United States as well. The distance does not bother her, as her family overseas is very accessible. Her son is looking forward to this adventure: his exams went well and he can go. The next time I (Mirjam) see him is on Facebook and there he is in pictures with his new friends in Las Vegas. He regularly calls his uncle, his mother's younger brother who is a student in the Netherlands. This uncle received funding for studies in the Netherlands, which was only possible through his connection with me in my position as a university lecturer and thus knowing my way in the land of university grants. The mother of the family is ill, her eyes hurt and nobody knows what the matter is, so they consult their doctor friend who has a private hospital in the town where they live. He has the latest instruments

from China that he bought on one of his regular trips there, but he can order by phone too. He prefers doing business in China, as it is cheaper than the United States. The younger brother in the Netherlands, the brother in England and the sister in the United States all contact their eldest brother in Cameroon who keeps them updated on their mother's condition. She is OK but needs surgery so her plans for going to the United States will have to wait for a while. By the way, she tried to get a visa a few months ago but was refused, much to her disappointment. The embassy in Ghana did not send her passport back in time for her to sort out payment. Her eldest daughter borrowed money to show the embassy that she could afford it. She borrowed it from a rich lady in town, like the mortgage on the house and the money used to buy all the things the family has. The interest rate she charges is set at 10 per cent and money can be borrowed for two weeks, no longer or they risk having to pay another 10 per cent interest.[8]

This is the context of the family today. What is said in these exchanges and how does it shape today's social realities? Let's again consider the linkages made by the phone and see what they have changed in an emotional and a social sense, as well as in material well-being, or even simply in material realization. The first realization mentioned is the son's travel. Would this 18-year-old son ever have travelled to the United States if his mother had not had a phone? This leads to questions about how different today's travel is compared to the past. In this sense it is interesting to note that the linkages the first migrants had were not similar. They were often invited for scholarships, through external connections like missionaries. The fact that people now easily organize it themselves is an important social change. One of the family's sons decided to construct a house in the village and was able to push the construction through by phone. This is what many people do in this part of Cameroon, and indeed the landscape of the village is changing because of linking and linking technology.

Increasingly, analysis of funerals in Africa in a diasporic world is at the centre of our analysis (cf. Geschiere 2009). These studies and our own observations in Cameroon and Europe demonstrate how the organization of this ritual has profoundly changed with the new possibilities for connecting. Funerals in Cameroon are often put on hold until children living in the United States or Europe can be present. Mortuaries are playing an increasing role but the costs of these funerals and their grandeur have increased as a consequence of easy access to money in the diasporic communities. The connection that is visible in texts on the Internet in exchanges between families and that is clear from phone calls has changed the emotions surrounding the death of the fathers and mothers of the Grassfields.

Mali

Central Mali is a Sahelian area where Fulani nomads developed a semi-sedentary lifestyle herding cattle and becoming part of the chiefdoms that were vested in the region by warlords. The nomads' mobility developed in relation to the ecology of the area and to the hierarchies they were part of. Droughts and conflict have always been part of their lives and influenced mobility patterns. They have always lived spread over large areas, keeping in contact with each other through travel itself. Important moments of contact are their ritual dances and marriages that are mostly celebrated in the rainy season when larger groups of nomads can be together due to the availability of pasture areas. Today cattle rearing in Central Mali is still one of the most successful ways of making a livelihood.

The droughts in the 1970s and 1980s were, however, exceptional in their devastation. The nomads compared them with the droughts at the beginning of the 20th century—a period that is remembered as one of the worst famines ever. Although moving has always been the normal way of life for nomadic pastoralists, the number of people who had to move was far greater this time. Families moved to the south, following itineraries that they had never followed before and these have now become part of their lives. Many of these families were no longer connected to their kin in Central Mali; they left impoverished and found a living in town or as herders for rich villagers. The need to relate to kin was not felt and they had no means of travelling back to the area. This led to new relations being created with the people in the South (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2003). Nonetheless the old lady in the cattle camp in Central Mali asked me (Mirjam) to bring my cassette recorder (to her a "radio") and tape the news of the camp and her kin so that I could travel with it and deliver it to her lost son. This was in 1991. She had no idea where he was at that time but the eagerness to know about each other had not disappeared.

In the region where these nomads live, access by cars was not common. There were no roads and the nearest town had a weekly market, which is a moment of contact, but no telephone lines for the public. This started to change in the first years of the 21st century when electricity arrived in the region, first in Douentza, the capital of the region with its 12,000 inhabitants, and then in smaller towns (3,000 to 8,000 inhabitants) along the tarred road in 2006. Today it has partially reached the nomads' hamlets

and camps in the bush. Electricity changed the region, bringing more markets, better contact by radios and lights, which make life different. It also helped to develop the market in one of the small towns, which led to the further development of markets in rural hamlets. One of these, surrounded by cattle camps, was the hamlet where we were doing our observations on the use of the mobile phone in 2009. With the market came more transport and more contact with the outside world. And eventually this led to the installation of the mobile network masts in the small town. Access to mobile telephony became a reality also for the nomads living in the surrounding camps.

Since 2006 this geographically remote region in which nomadic pastoralists live has received mobile networks, and the mobile phone market in the region has grown at a fantastic speed. Even in the small hamlet surrounded by seven camps of cattle nomads, one can buy phones, accessories and credit. Although there is no electricity, phones are charged in inventive ways and nomads are spending a lot of time and money getting connected so that they can contact their families in the south or even in other countries. When the phone network was only available in the capital city, people would travel there from the rural areas to call others further away. It was remarkable how people were able to get the phone numbers of their kin in the south; it even led to retracing family members that were thought to be lost. One example was a woman who managed to reach her husband who had left and set up a new family in Paris. Another example is how one of our friends in the cattle camp was using his phone to link to one of the country's big politicians in order to discuss his own political campaign. He managed to be elected as the political representative of the herdsmen of this camp. In 2007-2008 he used his phone at one spot, the hangar next to his hut, which was the only place where one could access the network, although for more serious matters, he still had to travel to the nearby town where the network was much better. Today, in 2011, this is no longer an issue and he can easily call from the camp at any time. He used to be one of the few to own a phone (that others also used) but it will soon be a gadget owned by every local herdsman and woman.[9]

The new linking has had an important effect on the economy of the herders. Many young men leave for the south in the dry season with large numbers of cattle that they herd for rich city dwellers. They are nowadays often contacted by these owners by phone and mobile telephones help when checking the prices of cattle at the markets. What they did in the past by travelling, for example taking messages for people, they do today with their mobile phones, and far more effectively (Sangare 2010).[10]

New Developments

When the mobile phone network first emerged in Africa, the main aim of the companies involved was to reach out to as many people as possible to achieve the highest possible profit. After all, business is business! The costs of subscriber identity module (SIM) cards and calling were kept relatively low and there were soon many possibilities to call very cheaply and African citizens were clever at adopting these technologies. SIM cards were not registered and there were few controls, although this changed recently when the initial announcement was made in 2010 that SIM cards would soon have to be registered. In January 2011 it was chaotic at the various service points in Cameroon as everybody tried to register their cards because their numbers would be blocked if they were not registered. Registration is required by showing one's identification card or passport. This type of registration was very new and it did provoke discussions. Some felt that it would be for their own good to register because in case of theft or loss, the card could be blocked and the number easily replaced. However the measures were immediately criticized as an attempt by the state to control its people. The SIM card is not only a means of connecting and freely relating but it has also become a passport for communication life and a way of controlling identities.

The Two Cases and Linking Analysis

These are two different examples of people/families in Africa who are living in a global world and at first sight do not appear to have much in common. However if we take a closer look, we can distinguish a common feature: the families have both appropriated the mobile phone and can now easily reach out to a geographically large space. How would we describe their lifestyle and their way of being? It is usual nowadays to see these families as transnational or transregional: they live in different countries/regions but their relations and connections allow them to ignore national localities and they blend in practice into one space, for example a social, economic and, in some instances, political space as well. They do not seem to live in geography but rather in sociology, in linking and relating.

The life of the family in Cameroon is dominated by their contacts with those far away, where the future of the sons and other family members is located. Every member of the family has a phone and some have two. They have all travelled either to Europe, the United States or within Africa to South Africa or to neighbouring Nigeria. They are a linking family and what happens in this linking reveals more about who they are and how their family is

organized than when we only concentrate on the people, the members of the family. For the Malian nomads, the situation may be slightly different because they are a mobile society in which travelling and mobility are normal features of social life, as has been the case for centuries. This is a typical migration or mobile culture (de Bruijn 2007) where linking has always been important, not only for their basic (ecological and economic) livelihoods but for their identity too, for who they are. This is visible in their kinship idioms, in the exchange relations they have developed over the course of the centuries and in the stories about the crises they have lived through. The linking itself is also part of the local discourse on society. Relating and ways of relating are essential elements of being. For both cases to understand social change it would not be enough to check the situation in the various geographical places, but it is the constant being between, the negotiations about the itineraries, the way contacts are made, for example the linking itself, that makes us understand these societies better and the processes and dynamics of social change.

In the end it seems that linking and relating over distances is as much part of the social life of the "community" as the linking and relating with those nearby. It is also important to question the quality of the linking. How do people relate to those they contact mainly by phone or who they see on Facebook or Twitter? Research has shown that the face-to-face relationship is still of utmost importance (cf. Molony 2009). In the case of Cameroon however, we observed an intense relating with those far away that might even be more intimate and emotional than the relating with those next door. People make choices about keeping some contacts going while others may fade away. Thus the choices made and the money spent on these relations reflect the emotional load of the relations and their importance for the daily well-being of the people involved. Calling those far away may become the most important moment in the week! However as the SIM card will also be an identity marker now that it is registered, calling is no longer without borders or limits.

It is important to note that in the cases presented above the new ways of connecting have had material consequences. They have led to people moving to other places in the world, to the redefinition of the funeral (and other rituals) or have made people return. These moves may literally change the landscape of the regions. On the other hand, this change places an emphasis on continuity and on building on older patterns of communication, movement and sociality.

Passports-to-Life: The Connecting Technology of HIV/AIDS Status Cards in Botswana

In the course of explorative research on sexuality and marriage in Molepolole, a rural town 80 kilometres west of Gaborone, focus group interviews[11] were conducted on the relationship between marriage, HIV/AIDS and society among a group of boys and girls aged 15-17 who were members of a local dance group and still attended school in Molepolole. We started by asking them about their ideas on marriage, with two or three boys answering our questions while the others, especially the girls, remained silent. On marriage, the dominant view among the boys was that girls demand too much from men. Whereas the unofficial leader of the group rejected marriage completely, one boy pointed out that he wanted to marry because of HIV: "One partner, one life!" he announced when we asked him to clarify his answer. Then we raised the issue of love and whether it was important or if only money counted. On love, the whole group remained silent but then the group started to talk about HIV. One boy said:

> Yes they told us about it at school. They told us not to have sex. But last month I did. A! Aish! I felt some. I felt it in my body, I suddenly felt my body. And I did it! After that, I went to the Tebelopele people. They told me not to do it again and tested me. And I was negative. I was positively negative!

The group laughed. Then young people started pulling out their passports-to-life, the cards people receive from the Tebelopele Voluntary and Counselling Centre (VCT) in which the results of their tests are written down and which serve to include them in so-called "risk-reduction" behavioural change programmes. "Oh you also got one!" cried one boy, taking his neighbour's passport. The boy then asked, "let me see what are you?" "Oh," answered the owner: "I am positive." The group laughed again.

What kind of technology of connection is this passport? What is its significance in terms of connecting people to public health policies that at the same time shape and transform people's intimate relations? To understand how linking technologies impact on social relations we want to highlight a second perspective in which we point at the bridging between the public and the private in social life for which certain linking technologies are responsible. While we can point to many examples of how the domain of public policies and power impact on the private lives of people in African situations (through institution building, schools and law),[12] we see one area where

this has become especially important, namely the domain of health. Due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, many African governments have been forced to put in place strong public policies through public health interventions, awareness campaigns, the establishment of voluntary testing and counselling centres aimed at targeting the private and intimate lives of citizens in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus (Iliffe 2006).

The globally available funds for the fight against the pandemic connect to and enable the development of many, often government-run, programmes that aim to promote behavioural change in the domains of sexuality, reproduction and relationships (Rabbow 2001; Fassin 2007; Robins 2009). An entire field of (medicalized) knowledge, social technologies of conscientiousness and awareness-raising and of care, treatment and prevention has emerged targeting the sexually active groups of the population in particular. Many African societies have in fact entered a new phase of the development of biopolitics that intimately link the public with the private and have seen the emergence of technologies that make this possible (Dilger and Luig 2010; Nguyen 2005). In Botswana, one of the linking devices that has been developed to establish interaction between behavioural change policies and the private lives of individuals is the passport-to-life that these young boys mentioned. Botswana is one of the countries where a process of biopolitical control has developed since the country demonstrated one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world (Heald 2006; Ntseane and Preece 2005). This is combined with a situation of relative wealth that has enabled the government and civil society organizations to effectively put in place an extensive infrastructure of biomedical systems for AIDS care, treatment and control. It has been developing an infrastructure of counselling and testing centres, AIDS clinics and antiretroviral (ARV) therapy roll-out programmes (Dilger and Luig 2010). AIDS-awareness campaigns focus particularly on sexual health and aim to impart ideas concerning the responsibility of the person in terms of safe sex and the reduction of risks vis-à-vis the transmission of the virus (Burchardt 2009). An important aspect of this is that every sexually active person in Botswana should know his/her status. This is considered a true sign of sexual responsibility.

In the course of the roll-out of intervention and treatment campaigns, this process of imparting responsibility requires people to open up their intimate spheres of life for inspection and supervision. AIDS workers, medical practitioners, counsellors and peer educators interview people about their lifestyle and the decisions they make in terms of their sexual and reproductive relations. In so doing, people receive counselling so as to be convinced of the value of a "responsible lifestyle" and to know about the moral obligations they have vis-à-vis their partners, families and society at large. In addition, many of their intimate behavioural patterns are recorded in statistical and other taxonomic systems of knowing the subject. A responsible person is expected to allow for a subordination to the detailed forms of knowing (about AIDS status, coital diaries, fertility and extra- and pre-marital relations) that biomedical regimes require. Authors are pointing at the new constellations of power that are emerging in the process, where medical systems join with political, religious and traditional authorities to create such systems of control and inspection (Nguyen 2005; Nkomazana 2007). In many cases this is related to the rise of testing and counselling centres and places where people can go to receive life-prolonging drugs.

In this context the passport-to-life was introduced through the country's voluntary counselling and testing centres. It is a document that records the HIV/AIDS status of the person as well as his/her "risk-avoidance" behaviour (meaning that much of the person's sexual behaviour has been made known to the counsellor/medical practitioner interacting with the person). This document is vital in the connection between the person and the state and between the person and intervention and treatment programmes. The passport creates connectivity to the state, but in its social life also changes the personal relations of the people that are recorded. One's AIDS status is now known to the person and having knowledge about it creates a moral and even legal context for the responsibility that people have in entering intimate relations with sexual partners.

To understand the power of the shaping of social relations that this passport stands for, the boys' blatant unruliness by publicly waving about a document that demonstrates their connection to behavioural change programmes and control but that is meant to remain hidden and confidential, is highly meaningful. If people turn up at the VCT centres they have, in principle, the choice of being HIV tested either anonymously (no details being recorded, except for the person's status) or being tested confidentially. In the latter case, the details are recorded in the passport-to-life giving the person's status and the counselling sessions that she or he will attend in view of enhancing "risk-reducing" behaviour. The passport has a number that corresponds with the Tebelopele record on the person and their trajectory of counselling and behavioural change. Tebelopele (which means vision) began introducing these passports in 2007 (*BOTUSA News*, July 2007) and since then has focused on "confidentiality testing." This means that the passport-to-life has become *the*

symbol of confidentiality and because it only has a number, it can never be linked directly to its owner by others.

The document refashions the notion of the self as testing is followed by counselling, when the person is informed of his/her status and what this demands in order to be responsible. Behavioural change implies adherence to safe-sex practices, regular testing, or ARV therapy. The technology of connecting that is described here connects these passports to a feature of social control and discipline: it effectively has the potential to monitor individuals. From the point of view of the user, the passport interestingly seems to suggest a kind of standardization. It turns a person's sexual history and an HIV/AIDS diagnosis into set procedures and attributes "positive" or "negative" qualities to them that then map out how people should start behaving. We argue that passports-to-life, as a device of connectivity, have helped to bring this linking of behaviour, supervision and taxonomy into being. Furthermore, the passport is linking people's lives to much wider circles of local-global interactions in health interventions, the fight against AIDS and the pressures being put on a government to introduce measures to steer the sexual lives of its population.

Passports in Botswana have always implied various rights and community services. They are an identity document linking the individual with the state and thus creating access to its services, yet they make it possible for the state to also gain information on its citizenry. The use of identity documents in the sphere of sexual health is building on this history. The most noticeable identity document in Botswana is the *Omang*, an identity card issued to every Botswana citizen over the age of 16 by the government. With it, citizens can make transactions, interact with the government, open a bank account, buy property and get a marriage or driving licence. Having a reasonably small population (2 million) has contributed to the taxonomic success of the Omang as inhabitants can be "known" to the government and the regular need to renew the Omang ensures the government of up-to-date knowledge of its citizenry. It has also played a crucial role in the way people access health-related facilities. Not having an identity card means that foreigners face difficulties in this respect. While Botswana has been Africa's economic miracle since the mid 1970s, the identity card provides access to all the benefits that a middle-income-earning society can offer (Durham 2002). Much is at stake regarding possession of a card of this nature, and young and old in the country are well aware of its intrinsic value. Due to its exclusionary nature, the Omang is another important "passport-to-life" by providing exclusionary access to the comparatively good life that Botswana can offer its citizens.

The major difference between the passport-to-life and the Omang is the aspect of confidentiality. While the Omang is a public document that proves one's identity in the public domain, the content of the passport-to-life is strictly private and has the added power of supervising and changing (intimate) behaviour. Omang (meaning who you are) is based on a wider field of social relations. It does not simply indicate a question of personal, "atomic" identity. Omang inquires about one's ancestry in particular, asking about one's family, parents and social location in order to identify a person against a backdrop of relationality and renders this social belonging public and knowledgeable.

This brings us to the question of the *effects* of linking technologies. The boys in the focus groups were demonstrating unruliness not only in terms of social conventions of sitting still and listening when adults are addressing them and being civil and letting others speak but they were inverting the idea of control and playing with it. Knowing that the passport-to-life subjects them to some control over their private lives and to a notion of being "responsible," it creates a much greater space for unruliness than the Omang can ever do, by "breaking the rules" concerning confidentiality. They made public (and even boast about) what should not be made public. In addition, their age was an issue as it was not clear whether they were over 16 (the age at which no parental consent is officially required to possess a passport-to-life). They were demonstrating independence with regard to this authority and the act of publicly displaying their passports-to-life is thus also significant: they demonstrated courage by contradicting the aspect of social control that the passport represents, yet in fact reconfirmed the way their personal lives are interlinked with such systems of social control. While the passport-to-life connects the boys to regimes of health and supervision, it impacts their social position and their social relations.

Discussion

Exploring the social life of linking within the paradigm of the social life of things brings us to analyze the linking itself, and the changes found there. It brings together different ideas from network theory, mobile communication studies and transnational studies. This paper has focused on how the social life of linking informs us about how people construct identities and the impact this has on the social changes in their society. This question is becoming more pertinent today as the possibilities for linking have increased enormously and the activity of linking is creating an intensification of social relations. While linking is often the central occupation of many people, also in

Africa, it changes our conceptualization of sociality and how sociality is demarcated within the confines of society. This point is not new and many authors have already pointed out that in an era of globalization the question becomes "where" society—its actual demarcations—can be located (cf. Amselle 2001; Ferguson 2006; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). While this is leading to a renewed interest in network analysis and an increased understanding of the flows and blockages of people, objects, images and ideas, we contend that society is becoming visible, as well as demarcated in the linking activities and devices, and in what these actually do. In analyzing these patterns of mobility, in which the role of linking for geographical mobility as well as social and mental mobility can be distinguished, linking devices are social facts that do not remain passive in the way social relations and identities are shaped. The types of "linking technologies" available are important to understanding social change. It is clear that people often combine forms of linking, or that one form of linking is reserved for a specific relationship. Importantly, the practice of linking or the practical outcome of linking, goes beyond the individual. It influences larger social formations, for instance the transnationalization of society, the creation of entrepreneurial networks or the flows of objects and images across cultural boundaries. The linkage itself is becoming like an actor (similar to Latour's actor network theory) in the shaping of these structures.

The first step in the analysis of linking will thus be questions about how people link, interpret links and appropriate them but also how the linking devices reversely come to possess them. In the example of the Cameroonian family, the linking is nowadays mainly done by mobile phone. These phones have a life of their own and when one loses them, life is no more. During our research in Cameroon we repeatedly heard exclamations that referred to the phone as the identity of the person in itself. The nomads have replaced their physical displacement by communication by phone but this does not make them feel less mobile.

The second point to be made about the technology of connections is that it establishes new opportunity structures. New relations can be formed (by using the mobile phone for instance), existing relations can change in nature and intensity, and connections may provide for new economic or political chances in trade, initiative and the pursuit of interests. An ethnography of connections can demonstrate what a difference it makes for a village in Cameroon or Mali if, in addition to the bridge, the mobile phone is introduced as a way of bridging distances. The shaping of the opportunity structures for the villagers directly relates to the power of the connection. The same applies to the study of connections relating to ideological and bureaucratic domains as we discussed regarding the introduction of the passport-to-life. It matters for people who are potentially HIV positive if a direct link is established with programmes of care, prevention and treatment, which is what the passport represents. This can even be a matter of life and death.

At the same time, we cannot be celebratory about connections as they also have the capacity to restrict and compartmentalize social life. In Cameroon, where technology is well developed and people are able to use the Internet, planes, cars, roads and mobile phones in advanced ways, these devices denote strong relationships/ties that are being kept alive and easily become the primary social space in which people think and act. The ties that run via these devices and are shaped by them can and often are much stronger than the ties people build up with their immediate social environment. In the case of nomadic societies, we see a stronger embedding in social linking, faraway and closer to home, as the mobile phone gives them an opportunity to pick and choose but also to develop stronger and more frequent ties. The family in Cameroon thus creates its own global space in which family matters are discussed, but in which new social and political identities can also be formed. In this sense, it may mean a continuation elsewhere in the transnational domain of the marginal socio-political and economic space that is similar to their positioning in Cameroon. Their marginality is "exported." The nomads also link up to family elsewhere and relate more intensely to their group members who are far away. Their social relations, which occur at a distance, have changed in the sense that they have become more intensive and are increasingly part of the various compartments in which they live.

This is an example of the division of social life into divisions/compartments that are guided by the technologies of linking. In a way, these compartments follow the patterns introduced by Granovetter (1973) and mainly compose of strong linkages, either characterized by ethnicity, identity or family ties. In other words, while divides—such as boundaries—often have the capacity to link people and spaces, connections have the capacity to divide social life into new compartments. This also applies to connecting devices that relate to ideological and moral domains such as was indicated by the passport-to-life. While it is a device of linking people to structures of power, (sexual and relational) discipline, medical treatment and care, it also has the capacity to divide and therefore compartmentalize social life. Its governmentality (cf. Foucault 1991) is deeply related to its compart-mentality. While

linking people, it also divides them into the "negatives" and the "positives," those on "risk-reduction" behavioural change programmes and those who are not, the ones that need counselling and those who do not, and those who need ARV treatment and those who do not.

A similar process of linking also can be seen to create new forms of governmentality. This becomes clear in the comparative example of the political control and supervision that SIM cards for mobile phones make possible. These now require the detailed identification of the user in a growing number of African countries and this has become an additional device for controlling populations in their linking activities. The point is that phone providers are connecting to political systems of control even in areas marked by violent conflict or oppression. While establishing connections, it appears as if a politically neutral and sheer "technological" operation of providing telecom facilities is underway, whereas in fact the registration of SIM-card users is also offering the opportunity for increased supervision and inspection. Linking thus is becoming synonymous with control, and specifically control of particular sections of a population.

This leads us to one final point. An analytical distinction still needs to be made between connections and emotional attachment. This distinction is relevant at the level of subjectivity and emotions because, as we demonstrated for the mobile phone and the passport-to-life, these devices of connectivity can have deep subjective meanings or layers of emotional expression and experience that also exist for feelings of attachment. In our opinion, connectivity precedes attachment. In a sense, emotional attachment can be the product of what connections make possible. This becomes clear if we compare, in the bridging of geographical distances, the bridge with the mobile phone. Relationships can be established with both, but differences in levels of attachment to people, place, culture and identity can also be created. As the cases in Cameroon and Mali demonstrate, new modes of connectivity may lead to shifting emotional attachments: the spaces and places of a person's local environment acquire new meaning and significance with the arrival of new modes of connectivity. The transnational domain can suddenly become a field where new emotional attachments emerge relating to new consumer identities, the city or the phone network. The passport-to-life makes this even clearer as the connection has the direct aim of changing attachments both morally and ideologically. Sensitivities surrounding the matter create a new emotional field whereby it is significant to become attached to an AIDS programme or a certain counsellor, or to a "buddy." The connection structures a landscape of attachments that are not automatically the kind of relationships that we may think of in the common understanding of spouse, family or friendships, but which nevertheless indicate attachments that are crucial or even life-saving.

Our analysis shows that the "work of connections," for example understanding what connections actually *do*, should be intimately part of any ethnography of modern African situations. The relative significance of connections is not predetermined but is highly contingent on local socio-historical and cultural situations. Such an ethnography can demonstrate how and why certain connections are preferred, become powerful and are capable of introducing change. It should intersect with a cognitive approach to connections, as the connections discussed in this paper require knowledge, skills, competences and understanding in their operation and use by providers and consumers alike. Importantly, there is a "learning of connections" going on in African societies in which many aspects cannot be assumed a priori as the skills and competences are about teaching and praxis that are highly situated, yet global at the same time.

Nevertheless linking technologies are not accessible in a similar way for everybody. Economic power and social capital (for example rules of access) are, as always, at the centre of the appropriation of these technologies and the outcome of the compartmentalization is only for those who have access to the technologies. Thus we may indeed see a perpetuation of marginalities or global shadows (Ferguson 2006), while at the same time the "fourth world" of those without access (Castells 2007) may become even more of a reality. An in-accessibility of linking technologies and thus an exclusion from specific forms of linking will lead to large groups of non-users being denied access to social opportunities—a darker side of the information and communication society and the abundance of linking technologies that a global world seems to promise.

Mirjam de Bruijn, African Studies Centre, Leiden University. P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands. E-mail: Bruijnm@ascleiden.nl.

Rijk van Dijk, African Studies Centre, Leiden University. P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands. E-mail: Dijkr@ascleiden.nl.

Notes

1 The ideas presented in this paper are based on discussions held in the "Connections and Transformations" research group at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands (www.ascleiden.nl). They form the core of an edited volume to be published in 2012 by Macmillan called *The Social Life of Connectivity in Africa*. We are thankful to the members of this research group for their many stimulating ideas and suggestions. We are also grateful to Karin van Bemmel for her assistance in completing this text.

2 Prof. Katz heads the Centre for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University: http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/ci/cmcs/.

3 Research programme funded by NWO/WOTRO, www.mobileafricarevisited.wordpress.com. Countries of research: Senegal (Casamance), Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Angola and South Africa.

4 Skuse and Cousins (2007) discuss how marginal/rural areas are linked to mobile phone networks and most (but not all) connect and thus develop. They emphasize the importance of the understanding of access to these new technologies.

5 These mobilities are described by Warnier (1984), one of the region's first ethnographers.

6 Hence the concept of bushfalling, which refers to the early mobility related to hunt, to Europe or the United States is a new form of this same hunting: to go and come back with rich pickings (cf. Nyamnjoh, fc).

7 A pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

8 This case study is a part of ongoing research by Mirjam de Bruijn (2009-2013) as part of a WOTRO/NWO-funded project (see Note 2).

9 The case presented here is based on observations in Mali but a recent study in Niger and Nigeria among similar pastoral groups revealed that the nomads have indeed embraced the mobile phone (de Bruijn et al. 2011).

10 Sangare (2010). This research was done as part of the WOTRO/NWO-funded project on communication and mobility (see Note 2) in a region where the author of this article spent several years for Ph.D. and post-doctoral research among nomadic pastoralists (1990-1992; 1997 and with regular visits in 2001, 2005, 2008 and 2009).

11 The focus-group discussion was conducted together with Dr. A. Bochow (MPI, Halle) who kindly allowed us to use the material gathered here. The quotes of the focus group conversation are taken from the field notes of A. Bochow, Molepolole, dd. April 6, 2009.

12 There is an extensive literature on this linkage, exploring first of all its cultural-historical features in the West (Foucault 1986; Giddens 1992), while recently there has also been an emerging interest in the ways in which these transformations of the public *and* the private occur as a result of the spread of globalizing ideas and images (Cole and Thomas 2009; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006).

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