Contacts in a box: Cell phones, social relations, and field research in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the impact of cell-phone use on social life in Africa, and explores its implications for field research. It focuses on new frontiers of economic activity associated with newly emerging product markets, showing how the popularity of cell phones coincides with a shift in the meaning of social ties. Young Africans in particular see in emerging markets an opportunity for personal advancement, and the cell phone is key in their navigation of this. The resulting privatisation of social relations impacts on the rapport researchers seek to establish in the field, as they too become part of the life-projects of aspiring Africans.

This article discusses the impact of rapidly spreading cell-phone use on social life in Africa, and it explores its implications for field research on the continent. It focuses on newly emerging product markets, which are important frontiers of social change where the contours of new, more mobile lifestyles that attract especially young Africans, are becoming visible. Cell phones feature centrally in these lifestyles, as a practical solution for dispersing social networks, but even more symbolic as signifiers of personal aspiration that the new markets represent.

Cell phones in sub-Saharan Africa have suddenly become commonplace. Watching not-so-old footage, say a 20-year-old Nigerian Nollywood movie, immediately drives this message home. One sees plenty of telephoning, but always on a landline: in a booth, a hotel lobby, or a government office. Since the late-1990s, international cell-phone service providers have made large investments in Africa's cell-phone infrastructure, quickly followed by leading cell-phone manufacturers ensuring an abundant supply of affordable phones. These developments have brought mobile telecommunication within ordinary Africans' reach; and, although cell-phone penetration across the African continent is not as high as recorded elsewhere, it has caught on with dazzling speed. Landlines have never been very popular in most sub-Saharan African countries, as traditionally they are expensive, concentrated in a few locations, and notoriously unreliable. The cell-phone revolution, however, has made them almost obsolete. Most Africans today have used a cell phone at least once, and people on cell phones increasingly dominate the African city-street scene.[1]

Africa's mobile revolution has not escaped the attention of the social sciences (Horst & Miller 2008; De Bruijn, et al. 2009). Numerous studies, piecemeal at first, but accelerating following the adoption of the technology, have produced a steady flow of publications since the early 2000s; for example the Web of Science currently registers over 200 journal articles dedicated to the topic. Skimming this literature conjures up a sphere of hopeful optimism. Cell phones are supposed not only to remove traditional obstacles in telecommunication (landline phones were hitherto monopolised by African administrative/political elites, see Nkwi 2009), or to emancipate hitherto disenfranchised groupings in African society (Tsarwe 2016) but also to spawn new communication forms (Etzo & Collender 2010). African migrants are the trite case recycled in popular discourses: the cell phone extends existing diasporas and facilitates new ones. It facilitates social relations beyond the boundaries of village, town, or state, transnationalising the flow of ideas and images, in the process exposing African imaginaries to larger, more global, frames of reference (Tazanu 2015). And the rapid spread of mobile telecommunication allegedly enables new forms of trade, integrating expanding circles of African entrepreneurs into the globe's sprawling economy, boosting growth, and promoting economic self-actualisation (Aker & Mbiti 2010).

Yet not all that glitters is gold. Although cell phones are a formidable force in transforming entire societies, they bring with them new challenges and problems. Consider, for instance, American sociologist Sherry Turkle whose influential book *Alone Together* (2011) warns against the negative social impacts of mobile telecommunication. It suggests that phones contribute to a sense of alienation: being in the presence of significant others yet without experiencing genuine social contact. She has in mind especially public places occupied by individuals staring at their phone screens, but also groups of friends seemingly spending time together while in reality updating their Facebook profiles or participating in WhatsApp discussions. She argues that, because of a growing fixation on mobile communication technology, the experience of contact shifts to virtual spaces, watering down the here and now, producing ephemeral social contact. And that is dangerous, she claims, because essentially we are a social species. So because of the cell phone's growing grip on everyday life, the mobile age manifests an erosion of sociability that produces a sense of loneliness that may result in a deeply felt decoupling of society. The paradox of the mobile era is that people become embedded in rapidly expanding, globalising networks while lacking true social experience.

Critical observers of Africa, however, relate cell phones less to social deprivation than to economic underdevelopment (Smith 2006). They point for instance to the substantial costs associated with cell-phone usage. State-of-the-art telephones are expensive, and topping up airtime (few African countries use a subscription system) eats deeply into daily budgets. Many of the globe's underclass, Paul Collier's *Bottom Billion* (2007), live in Africa, and for poor Africans who live on less than the proverbial dollar a day, cell-phone usage is a rarely attainable luxury. A large and growing subgroup of Africa's population therefore finds itself positioned outside the rapidly emerging mobile order. Also, cell-phone coverage remains far from complete: many white spots remain on Africa's map, showing places of limited or non-existent cell-phone connections (Asongu 2015). The reason is obvious. Mobile telephone companies invest where they can expect to reap a healthy profit: in and around cities and major towns, along major roads, and close to concentration points such as markets, ports, and airports. The African countryside

in particular fares badly, as potential users are widely dispersed and their pockets are not deep enough to justify the installation of transmission stations and other expensive telecoms equipment.

Yet another strand of research critiques the optimists' assumption that cell phones in themselves can transform entire societies. They view such phones as part of a broader socio-technical network in which the effects of new technology, in the sphere of communication or otherwise, are seen as being embedded in and mediated in social relations. The British-African studies scholar Tom Molony, for instance, shows how prevailing power hierarchies between Tanzanian farmers and vegetable buyers brokering their produce on urban markets do not miraculously disappear, as phone optimists tend to argue. Because the technology does not alter trust relations between the two groups, and because buyers are also the farmers' creditors, in daily practice the phone does not change their bargaining power (Molony 2008). And Dutch anthropologist Jens Andersson shows how the coordination of long-distance labour migration between northern Malawi and South Africa has improved following the introduction of cell phones; however, whether Malawian migrants are successful at their point of destination depends on extra-technological factors, historical continuities in the socio-cultural organisation of migration in particular (Andersson 2006).

This article subscribes to the more critical interpretation of cell-phone use in Africa; however, in order to facilitate further debate, it adds an element that thus far remains under-discussed: what I will call the 'privatisation' of social relations which coincides with the rapid spread of cell-phone technology across the African continent. I narrow the discussion to the special case of so-called newly emerging product markets in Africa, where cell phones play a special role, showing how these new markets exert a particularly strong pull on young Africans, finding in it a new environment to fulfil personal aspirations. Understanding these aspirations in terms of social networking, especially how that enhances the prestige of crafting ties beyond the sphere of kinship, appears key in grasping cell phones' special role. Young Africans navigating the new markets therefore tend to see phones as a liberating device. This realisation presents challenges for field researchers working in these new social environments, in particular those associated with the direct observation of social life – the hallmark of the ethnographic craft underpinning all field research – a point addressed in the second part of this article.

Before this point is taken further, there first follows a short methodological reflection. The article draws on ethnographic field research that I carried out over the past 15 years, concentrated in two sites where product markets on the African continent were newly forming: the Euro-West African second-hand car trade, and the airborne export fisheries from Lake Victoria, Uganda. Although the ethnographic work was concerned with the social practices and cosmologies of African entrepreneurs operating in these markets, their cell-phone use gradually suggested itself as an important theme. Entrepreneurs draw and depend on the phones for day-to-day business coordination, but the devices also appear to feature in their ideals and fantasies of personal aspiration. Parallel to including cell-phone use in my observations of African entrepreneurs' social life, I began to appreciate theoretical issues implied in cell-phone use in Africa by reviewing the relevant literature. Iterating between focused observations in the field and familiarising myself with theoretical themes, I began to form my own ideas about cell-phone use in Africa, which are presented in this article.

The article now continues with a short history of the rise of emerging product markets in Africa in order to contextualise the cell-phone issue. This presentation is followed by a further exploration of how the new markets spawn qualitative changes in social behaviour, pointing to a shift towards market-based forms of social engagement that underpin the privatisation of social ties – the central tenet of this article. The article then explores the consequences for field research, which draws on a social network perspective that makes normative expectations central in day-to-day social conduct. It discusses especially the complexities for fieldwork practice of unravelling the individualising discourses and strategic manipulations that are part of young Africans' increasingly mobile lifestyles, and offers suggestions on how researchers in the field can come to terms with this.

Africa's newly emerging product markets and the social consequences

Since the third quarter of the 20th century, Africa's economies have been associated with decline and stagnation because of the one-sided dependency on cash crops: unprocessed export produce such as cocoa, coffee, and tea. First introduced by European colonial administrators, this prevailing political-economic structure changed around the turn of the millennium. The history of this change is far more complex than can be conveyed here (Leys 1996), but a few broad sketches will suffice for the purpose of this article. First, African governments, facing an imminent balance-of-payment crisis following the fall of world market prices for cash crops since the 1970s, received mass emergency balance-of-payment support from the Bretton-Woods institutions (IMF & World Bank). In return, they carried through a neoliberal reform agenda, shifting the political-economic balance from the state to the market. This 'liberalisation' of product markets matched by a steady influx of foreign investments created a new business environment, expected to foster global trade and entrepreneurship (Taylor 2012).

These globalising tendencies coincided with a dramatic change in product market composition. Whereas previously Africa's exports comprised unprocessed, low-value crops, in the past two decades the economic landscape has shifted to high-value, high-tech agro-commodities. Today, cut flowers and vegetables are grown across East and southern Africa, and fresh and farmed fish from various water bodies, both inland and marine (Dolan 2005), find their way easily to overseas destinations. But also consider the new extractive industries emerging in several mineral belts, traditionally limited to copper, diamonds, and gold, comprising in the modern era precious ores such as coltan (ironically, essential for manufacturing cell phones, see Agar 2013). On the import side, things are also changing dramatically. Whereas African imports previously differentiated between luxury consumer goods for economic elites and processed foodstuffs for ordinary Africans, the past two decades have seen a remarkable growth in middle-class consumer items, including clothing, household appliances, and (second-hand) cars (Tranberg-Hansen 1999; Beuving 2006; Brooks 2015).

These new product markets have a distinctive honeypot effect, especially on young Africans.[2] At first glance, this appears simply a result of the promise of making a quick buck in a new global business, contrasting sharply with limited economic opportunity elsewhere on the continent – the countryside in particular. African farming continues to be determined by a combination of subsistence, often low-productive agriculture with the cultivation of traditional export crops that fetch little money per volume and compete

on the world market (Jayne et al. 2015). Prices there can fluctuate dramatically, resulting in an uncertain future. Young Africans try to escape from that predicament, development sociologist Bryceson (2002) argues, and newly emerging markets fuel their aspirations for economic advancement.

This article does not subscribe to an interpretation of the term market in the sense that is implied in economic textbooks: an abstract space wherein calculating, profit-seeking individuals anonymously meet through equilibrium-prices (Douglas & Ney 1998). For the purpose of the discussion, it subscribes instead to a more substantivist interpretation, viewing markets as a concrete, observable reality through which actors form social networks that condition their economic behaviour: markets as socially embedded institutions (Gudeman 2015). Against this backdrop, the term emerging market denotes a coagulation of entrepreneurial networks around the marketing of new products or services, bringing together new actors – Africans as well as others – along which novel ideas of the self and the other may form.

Groups that are drawn into these new networks show a propensity to move toward the centres of newly emerging markets: major towns and cities. Beyond such established nodes in globalising networks of migration and trade however, product markets also emerge in new frontiers, such as mining towns and export zones along the coast and larger lakes. The new migration following new markets has several consequences, chief of which is that networks of social relations are becoming increasingly dispersed. Of course, the continent has seen similar social transformations earlier in its (post)colonial history, especially in connection with several waves of urbanisation. Some of these were associated with natural resource booms (Fergusson 1999), others with a history of colonial administration (Simone 2004). In either case the empirical record suggests that urban migrants' are not severed from, but remain closely entangled with, the African countryside (Andersson 2001). Indeed, increased socio-geographical separation may offer an explanation for the rapidity of cell-phone adoption in Africa: an essential communication technology in an increasingly mobile society (Hahn & Kibora 2008).

The relations between newly forming African mobilities and emerging product markets are obviously more complex than can be discussed here. Whether or not it consolidates into a circulatory migration, that space–time compresses flows of people, money, and ideas remains an especially tenacious question (Mbembe 2001). But beneath the surface of, real or imagined, increased mobility lurks yet another problem with which this article takes issue. The cell phone also makes possible new forms of social relations management (Kenaw 2012); and such management appears key in social life surrounding the new markets. An important reason for this assertion lies in young Africans' motivation to venture to these markets' centres. Making money obviously plays a role (McDade & Spring 2005), but recent research unveils a more layered reality, in particular that new markets' great popularity benefit some privileged – usually well-established – groups, at the detriment of others, bearing the brunt of competitive pressures that obfuscate opportunity for capital accumulation (Maertens & Swinnen 2009; Ouma, et al. 2013). For young Africans especially, life in the new markets presents itself as a marginal endeavour, therefore, whereby daily practice remains far from the envisaged El Dorado (Beuving 2016).

The new migrants thus defy categorisation as economic refugees (Diggins 2015). Key to better capturing their layered motivations is a process that may be termed the privatisation of social relations. Privatisation is a trope usually associated with neoliberalism: a

societal transformation where the language of the marketplace increasingly seeps into all corners of everyday life (Kumar & Makarova 2008). Of course, that is neither inevitable nor necessary: it remains to be empirically established how the twin forces of marketisation and demarketisation are mutually constituted. The American-British anthropologist David Graeber, for instance, is adamant in his bestselling book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011) how everyday forms of sociability continue to prevail in everyday life. Others, however, point to a peculiar cultural consequence of neoliberalism: individuals increasingly construe social relationships as private property (Centeno & Cohen 2012). Consequently, members of many of today's (African) societies view social relations as an aspect of the individual – to be manipulated, appropriated, or otherwise utilised for personal gain.

These neoliberal tendencies may be strongly contested as a matter of convention by more critically inclined social scientists, but it appears they fall on fertile ground among young Africans who have migrated from the countryside. They enjoy new freedoms in the new markets, which constitute a social environment that contrasts strikingly with the mandatory nature of rural social relations. These are experienced as dominated by the extended family; and, especially for young men in more patriarchal societies, by older brothers, fathers, and grandfathers (Warnier 1993; Geschiere 2003). In short, a host of men who are related through blood or marriage – have a say over the direction of their lives. Consequently, what appear as important personal decisions over major life events in reality are collective issues that have to be negotiated with an entire network of male kinfolk. Young women face the added impediment of marriage, especially when local custom favours patrilocal arrangements, weakening a newly wed bride's ties with her own relatives (Barratt, et al. 2015). In sum, both young women and young men associate the African countryside with a world wherein personal autonomy is difficult to attain, and in many cases has to be fought for.

Life in Africa's emerging markets represents another extreme for many Africans. The network of (especially male) kinfolk is considered to be far less prominent here, and that creates more room for manoeuvre. My own ethnographic work on export fisheries on Uganda's Lake Victoria shows, for instance, that young (fisher)men deliberately look for spots on Lake Victoria where relatives are few – even when this minimises economic opportunity (Beuving 2010). Ugandan fisherman Robert once told me: 'I wanted to come here [Lambu, a prominent coastal fishing village] because my brothers in the village always make me work for them. How can I ever develop like that!'[3] Another example comes from Zambia where it was observed that miners rarely inform those remaining in their villages about their movements; this appears to be a deliberate strategy to avoid being followed by relatives who they fear may eventually dominate them (Fessehaie & Morris 2013). In their new existence, social relations thus play a new role; and being able to command and control them is part of the magical lure that the new product markets exert.

The privatisation of social ties discussed here may be seen as an extension of what social theorists term 'networked individualism': the transformation of corporate groups into webs of interacting/transacting individuals, facilitated by favourable economic conditions as well as by mobile communication technologies (Rainie & Wellman 2012). There is, however, an interesting paradox to consider that the remainder of the article explores further. On the one hand, it will be shown how young Africans aspire to singleplex

relationships ingrained in the marketisation trope underpinning the new markets. That comes with a promise to operate beyond prevailing, often authoritarian, social hierarchies. Yet on the other hand, the ethnographic record also suggests that they remain committed to communal networks of mutual obligations (Hahn & Kibora 2008), wherein the cell phone functions to maintain existing social bonds across considerable distance (Kibere 2016). Rather than supplying the final answer to this challenging puzzle, the article seeks to appraise how young Africans navigate these social consequences, the ideational side of which is further theorised in the following section.

Symbols of personal aspiration: toward market-based social ties?

The emergence of new product markets may be taken as an indication of Africa's ongoing engagement with broader, more global, frames of economic reference – a process elsewhere referred to as the continent's 'extraversion' (Bayart 2000). Because of structural adjustment conditionalities, which opened African economies to world markets, it makes sense to construe the privatisation of social relations as a logical extension of the forces of a neoliberal capitalism, emphasising market-based forms of social engagement. But that ignores the manifold ways through which young Africans shape their own destinies, especially how they are motivated to shape the future in a distinctly different manner than their forebears did (Gilbert 2016). Distancing themselves from strong traditional ties – perceived as a restricting universe of kin-based control – plays a crucial role therein. In their new lives, family ties are no longer cast in stone but become part of a set of social relations that may, or may not, be mobilised. In that new social reality, young Africans make choices that may deviate sharply from what was previously considered to be a matter of custom or propriety.

In this unfolding symbolic complexity, the cell phone plays an essential role. It constitutes the technology enabling young Africans to navigate the new, often ephemeral, social world of emerging markets. Cell-phone numbers are the quintessential address in a globalising world; just like postal addresses were in an earlier era (Alpes 2017). And owning a cell phone expresses the capacity to participate in the new, mobile order as a fully-fledged member. The procurement of a cell phone is an essential first step therefore, and not owning or accessing one is a source of social stigma, comparable to being seen as a poor person (Carmody 2012). The device itself enables its owner or user to mobilise the network of social relations stored on it by simply pushing a few buttons. Thus, sharing cell-phone numbers with another person symbolically charges the exchange with a special meaning: you pass on to another person something that belongs to you, contributing to a sense of personal autonomy. The social appears to be transformed into something private, i.e. it is under the control of the individual and can be manipulated for personal advancement in the sense of comprising a marketable product.

The rapid takeoff of mobile-phone use in Africa can therefore be seen as an indication of qualitative social change, and beneath that lurks a reconfiguration of received notions of reciprocity. Reciprocity ranks among African studies' classic research problems and may in a crude sense be summarised as: 'when I give something to someone else, what do I get in return?' The historical background of this question is non-capitalist – or, in the parlance of that time, 'primitive' – African society wherein exchange appears to take the shape of gifts. Marcel Mauss, the French anthropologist who first theorised this problem, argued

that exchange in 'non-capitalist society takes the form of mutual gifts; and that exchange imbalances result in an expectation of future reciprocity or in a debt' (Fournier 2015). Therefore, entire (African) societies are viewed as being enmeshed in complex webs of mutual indebtedness through gift giving. The term gift may have the connotation of a birthday or other festive event in our contemporary society, but Mauss has a broader interpretation in mind: in addition to objects, the term encompasses mutual favours, in some cases culminating in marriage or other long-term social arrangements.

Delving deeper into the problem of gift exchange unveils two chief concerns: the time-frame concerned, and whether it is subject to calculation and administration (Peebles 2010). A full review of the plethora of literature spawned by these problems over the past century is beyond the purpose of this article, but two statements are relevant for our discussion. Mauss argues that a true gift is characterised by what he terms 'extended' (also called indirect) reciprocity; in other words, the giver upon giving does not expect to be reciprocated in the short term; this may even stretch across several generations. Further, true gifts lack a calculative logic; it is not grounded in an administrative register with money as its chief, quantitative expression (Guyer 2004). Gifts appear as gratis exchange, therefore. If these two conditions are not met, Mauss argues, gifts are really commodities that belong to the realm of capitalism, which is characterised by the economic principle of utility maximisation. Though building on a now debunked dichotomy between capitalist and non-(or 'proto-', or 'pre-') capitalist economic orders (Hahn & Hart 2011), elements of it remain useful for the present discussion.

Building on this idea, the privatisation of social relations thus entails a shift from generalised reciprocity, in which record-keeping is considered awkward, to more immediate forms wherein accounts are kept – and supposed to be kept: tit-for-tat. This may be seen as reflecting the logic of the market, with its twin promise of enhanced efficiency and profit, but, in everyday social practice, things are more complicated. Another example from Lake Victoria: during the field research, I looked at boat owners' entrepreneurship, and it appeared that they have a tendency to avoid *multiplex* relationships. Rather than recruiting relatives, boat owners prefer to hire crews from among the large groups of migrants who go to the lake trying to make a living in the sprawling labour market that surrounds the lake's export fishing industry. Boat owners furthermore minimise collaborations with their colleagues, such as pooling capital to reduce losses in the risky fishing business (Nile perch is perishable and deteriorates quickly). Collaboration in this uncertain universe requires an attitude that values generalised reciprocity, whereas in boat-owner circles a market logic emerged that casts doubt on practices that do not immediately materialise into something concrete. Put differently, they lack the mutual trust needed to commit time, effort, and capital to shared activity with an uncertain outcome.

The rise and spread of market-oriented values may have serious consequences for field research. In a world where private social relations prevail, the question of what an informant may expect in return for his/her collaboration in a research project becomes a logical one. Of course, the problem of reciprocity with regards informants in field research is not new. Graeber describes in *Debt* how the Nuer (inhabitants of south Sudan) informants of British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard assumed he was working as a spy for the British colonial government. Around the time of Evans-Pritchard's field research, there had been an uprising in Sudan, and the Royal Air Force (RAF) had

bombed several Nuer villages in retaliation. Hence, the Nuer received the anthropologist with feelings of deep suspicion, expecting nothing but more misery, and they collectively decided to deceive him by deliberately providing misinformation, giving incorrect directions in the field, and so on (Graeber 2011: 96–7).

The field researcher who is interested in social life in or around Africa's emerging markets may be received with similar reservation. After all, here is a world in which the ideal of personal choice prevails, and young Africans appear choosy when it comes to social engagements – the very rationale for their presence. For them, accepting an outsider figures in a broader life-project driven by personal aspiration and self-actualisation, in which another person's contribution is carefully considered. The field researcher is seamlessly integrated into that project, adding a new dimension to social relations. It induces him or her to navigate a new social landscape of mutual expectations and social norm, altering field research practice in unprecedented ways.

Boxing-in social ties: the end of ethnographic observation?

So what does the privatisation of social relations mean for the field researcher who wants to study social life in Africa? Most immediately, it may be surmised that social relations become less directly visible and hence defy classical ethnographic observation. In the proverbial village setting where field research first crystallised (Kuper 2005), the researcher could personally witness patterns of human interaction. This privileged access disappears abruptly with the spread of cell-phone communication: it boxes-in the network of social relations. Take for instance an informant who is immersed in cell-phone conversation: the identity of his/her interlocutor will not be automatically clear. Obviously, it may be possible to make inquiries about this after the conversation ends, but in many cases this will be considered awkward, especially at the beginning of field research when rapport with informants has still to be established. Consequently, field researchers are compelled to cultivate much better relations in the field than their predecessors did, because the advantages of direct observation are more limited. It is imperative, therefore, that they seek to develop closer field relationships in order to get a sense of the network of social ties in which their informants are embedded. Also, it requires the cultivation of new sensitivities for small clues, such as hearing snippets of cell-phone conversations in passing, half-reading a text message, and so on.

The change in symbolic meaning that accompanies the privatisation of social relations impacts on field research practice. Whether young Africans navigating the new markets truly find greater autonomy, or whether this constitutes predominantly an ideal, remains a contested issue that requires further social inquiry which is beyond the ambition of this article. For the purpose of elucidating the cell phone/field research nexus, it is relevant to consider further how this ideal confronts research practice with new challenges. To do so, the article draws on a social network perspective pioneered in social anthropology by Bott (1957), developed further into a transactional perspective on social relationships by Mitchell (1973) and Boissevain (1974), and mainstreamed subsequently into field research methodologies (White & Johansen 2005; see also Beuving & De Vries 2015: 135–56). It explores various substantive aspects of social interaction, but for the purpose of this article two appear of special importance: the diversity and the transactional content of social ties.

The transactional perspective finds inspiration in the Chicago school of symbolic inter-actionism, construing social relations as role relations. Consequently, social ties produce normative expectations about how one ought to behave in social situations. A short example from teaching may clarify this position. A lecturer teaching a class assumes the role of teacher once he positions himself in front of his student audience, therewith responding to students' expectations of a classroom situation. Doing otherwise, though not immediately resulting in the breakdown of social order, will be experienced by the students as awkward – a sentiment that reveals a violation of expectations. Relations encom-passing several roles – colleagues having an affair or siblings running an enterprise – are what social anthropologists call *multiplex* relations, whereas they call single-role relations *singleplex*. We hypothesise that the privatisation of social relations fosters *singleplex* relations and that these are laden with weaker expectations of appropriate or desirable behaviour. Normally, it is easier to ignore or neglect such ties, and that is precisely what young, aspiring Africans find attractive about them.

But that is easier said than done: in daily practice it may be more difficult to ignore pre-vailing norms, and that constrains individual choice – even when contacts are far away and interaction is limited in frequency. Another example from my own ethnographic work, this time involving the world of second-hand car trading in West Africa, may clarify this. Second-hand car dealers from Niger run a business in neighbouring Bénin retailing cars imported from Europe. Hamidou, one of my key informants, is the son of a wealthy cattle trader, Taybou, and he started business with capital borrowed from his father. Although this is a common practice in this part of Africa, it also brings along dependencies between fathers and their sons. At the same time, Hamidou prefers to keep his father at a distance, reporting on his business only periodically, and ideally directly after he has struck a particularly good deal to make a good impression. If possible, he delivers his reports by phone to avoid spot inspections by his father. He comments on this practice: '*Quand mon vieux est là, il me dérange trop; il me fait faire des cours – même devant mes employées!*'[4]

During the field research however, his father repeatedly travelled down from his native Niamey, and typically did that unannounced. These occasions spawned a marked change in Hamidou's demeanour. Normally presenting himself as an autonomous trader, self-assured and with an upright gait, commanding his dozen or so employees who quickly respond to his many whims, in the presence of his father Hamidou adopts a far more sub-missive stance. This makes sense in a social world in which paternal hierarchies are steep and authoritarian; one does not contradict one's father, older brother, or even uncle – not without risking a serious dressing-down. The days after such visits usually see a bad-tem-pered Hamidou. His carefully cultivated self-presentation clearly suffers a dent (Beuving 2006).

The cell phone also increases opportunities to pretend; act 'as if'. The work of American anthropologist Andrew Walsh offers a good example. He describes the social lives of sap-phire miners from Madagascar. In the sapphire business (of strategic importance for the island's economy), a new category of intermediaries has emerged, locally called *demarch-ers*. They broker between local miners and foreign traders in precious stones, mostly Thai businessmen. The intermediaries prefer to keep secret the details of their upstream con-tacts, thus making the miners believe they are the real buyers of their products. In relation to their Thai customers, the traders pretend to represent the miners, usually feigning a pedigree in the mining industry, thus hoping to negotiate better prices. The tripartite

buyer-miner-broker contacts usually occur via cell phone, helping the *demarchers* to shield the true nature of their contacts from the other two parties. The absence of *multiplex* relations facilitates secrecy: the buyers are almost without exception foreigners, and the *demarchers* originate in Antananarivo, Madagascar's capital (Walsh 2003).

Cell phones offer yet another possibility for camouflage: to go offline without raising too much suspicion. Cell phones, and certainly their smarter progeny, are energy-hungry devices and, with batteries losing electrical charge capacity with advancing age, frequent recharging is inevitable. Power cuts, however, are frequent and unpredictable in Africa, so it is not uncommon to have a flat battery that results in a dead phone. Cell-phone theft is also common, and malfunction due to Africa's harsh environmental conditions (heat, solar radiation) is frequent. The world of phone use in Africa is hence littered with perfectly acceptable excuses not to have a working phone. Obviously, this feature may be deliberately used for personal benefit, for instance to keep undesired creditors or importunate relatives at a safe distance (Archambault 2013). For West African second-hand car dealers for instance, switching off their phone on the pretext of theft is an important strategy to avoid the misery of debt. Profits in this business are subject to considerable fluctuation, and many dealers find themselves confronted with serious debt. Recouping debt proves a serious problem. Bénin's car markets are large and spread-out, and there is a constant flux of people; for an individual trader, it is a hair-raising challenge to keep track of his/her network's movements. In this ephemeral world, the cell phone is chief in coordinating business. Concurrently, pushing the correct button or changing the SIM card facilitates an individual's disappearance.

Crucially for field research practice however, pretension is not confined to informants' social/business network; the field researcher is also directly involved. The cell phone offers informants new possibilities to shape their relations with the field researcher: pretending to be somewhere else or even someone else (muffling their voice, or handing the phone to another person with clear instructions about how to respond, as happened to me on several occasions), when questions get too tricky. This strategic manipulation of information between informant and researcher is frustrating because it makes field research a more slippery affair than it already is normally. It also invites careful scrutiny of the conditions under which such pretension usually or typically occurs – sometimes this yields new information. To return briefly to Hamidou: his demeanour change in his father's presence represents a warning to avoid the pitfall of voluntaristic individualism – the trader as a self-made man. Young Africans may like to present themselves to the outside world as autonomous individuals, their discourses teeming with references to self-actuating, but it remains of crucial importance to establish ethnographically how that ideal finds expression in everyday social practice and relations.

Conclusions

The privatisation of social relations in Africa's newly emerging product markets, and the cell phone's special role therein, confronts field researchers with new challenges. Through the cell phone, informants' contacts are boxed-in, and this complicates their direct observation, obscuring an important field of social inquiry from the classical method of ethnographic observation. New research strategies are therefore needed. The cell phone can serve as a research instrument in itself. Consider, for instance,

lending one's phone to informants who cannot access one otherwise, offering a glimpse of social relations management. Also, questions about numbers stored in an informant's device can be included in the casual conversation that is at the heart of field research interactions (Driessen & Janssen 2013). In terms of recording, the cell phone makes it possible to record conversations and situations in a more natural way: in a mobile world, a field researcher using a cell phone does not attract much attention.

Such novel research practices obviously confront field researchers with new ethical questions,[5] but, more relevant for the purpose of this article, I argue that mobile networks are an expression of shifting symbolic meanings in social relations. More remains to be said than this article can cover, but hopefully it is clear that field research models which crystallised in an earlier era no longer suffice in the social study of today's sub-Saharan Africa. The advance of field research practice hence depends on the development of new models, both conceptual and methodological. An important consideration, or so the evidence presented in this article suggests, is that, for young Africans, engaging with family and village networks is no longer an automatic reality. The same applies to socio-ethnic relations. There is mounting evidence that their importance is waning because new markets bring new networks together, crafting new solidarities and new social identities. The shift away from village, family, and ethnic group toward the centres of Africa's emerging markets is part of a broader tendency toward a more autonomous destiny. The cell phone is a visible vehicle marking that transformation and therefore constitutes an interesting entrance into better capturing the fundamental changes currently unfolding in Africa.

Notes

1. 'Cell phone' refers in this article mainly to mobile phones using voice exclusively (compare Donner 2008). The ethnographic observations in the current discussion are concentrated in a period when more advanced, often Internet-based, functionalities (so-called smart phones) were not yet widely available. That said, my more recent observations (see Beuving 2015) suggest that the social processes discussed in this article are ongoing.
2. Note that the article uses 'young Africans' as a social term rather than as a strictly defined age category. It draws on Africans' symbolic self-understandings of being young, typically emphasising liminality. My ethnographic work suggests that this includes (but is not limited to) being part of affinal relationships that are not formalised as a marriage and in the process of building up a network of dependents. Obviously, major socioeconomic inequalities are entailed in this *emic* interpretation – coming from a poor family works against moving out of youth – but that problematic is not part of the current discussion.
3. Interview, Lambu, Uganda (25 November 2012).
4. 'When my father is around, he never ceases to upset me; he constantly makes me run errands – even with my employees present!' Interview, Cotonou (14 July 2006), translated by author.
5. The ethnographic work documented in this article subscribes to accepted ethical principles: serve the truth and avoid informants' involuntary exposure. Although ingrained in the craft of anthropological field research, these principles are increasingly bureaucratised, in particular by administering informed consent forms to informants. Yet a major question remains as to whether the mutual confidence and conscientiousness underpinning field research ethics can be replaced by procedures, and, if so, how that resonates with the naturalistic ambition to which many anthropologists commit themselves (Beuving & De Vries 2015). These thorny questions require further exploration, which is beyond the purview of this article.

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Disclosure statement

Note on Contributor

Joost Beuving teaches at Radboud University and he specialises in the anthropology of entrepreneurship as well as in African Studies. He has conducted fieldwork in East and West Africa. His broader interest is methodological.

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