Everyday Use of Mobile Phones in Niger

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the effects of mobile phone use on relationships among people in Niger. The study is based on a fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2003 and 2004 among Nigerien urban users of mobile phones in Niamey, the capital city. Semi-structured interviews were used to find out how people 'experience' the use of mobile phones in their everyday life. The author argues that the use of mobile phones in Niger is expanding women's sphere of privacy, challenging the disintegration effects of urban life, reinforcing communal ties, changing social use of time and what Pertierra et al. (2002) call 'discursive practices.' The paper concludes by explaining that the popularity of mobile phones in Africa and particularly in Niger lies essentially in the manipulability and low cost of those telecommunications devices, including the fact that mobile phones do not require a certain level of literacy among the users.

Key Terms: mobile phone, privacy, urban life, gendered technology, ITU, sub-Saharan Africa

Résumé

Cet article porte sur une analyse critique des effets de l'usage du téléphone mobile sur les relations interpersonnelles au Niger. L'étude est basée sur des travaux de terrain effectués pendant l'été en 2003 et 2004 auprès des citadins Nigériens utilisateurs de téléphones mobiles à Niamey, la capitale du pays. Les interviews semi-structurées ont été utilisées afin de comprendre comment les citoyens 'vivent' l'utilisation du téléphone mobile au quotidien. Du point de vue de l'auteur, l'usage du téléphone portable entraîne une extension de la sphère d'intimité chez les femmes. Se faisant, l'usage de ces 'gadgets' permet

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de lutter contre les effets de désintégration de la vie moderne, renforce les liens communautaires, modifie la gestion du temps et de ce que Pertierra et al ont convenu d'appeler 'les pratiques discursives'. En conclusion, l'auteur justifie la popularité du téléphone mobile en Afrique et au Niger en particulier par la manipulabité et l'abordabilité des coûts de ses outils de télécommunications, y compris le fait que le portable n'exige pas son utilisateur d'avoir un certain niveau d'instruction préalable.

Termes clés : téléphone mobile, Intimité, Vie urbaine ITU, Afrique sub-saharienne.

Introduction

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Africa is now 'the world's fastest growing mobile market' (2004:1). ITU states that between 1998 and 2003, the increase in mobile phone subscriptions exceeded by 1,000 per cent those of fixed lines and that more than 51.8 million people in Africa had mobile phones (this figure is expected to rise to 90 million in 2005) while only 25.1 million owned fixed lines. ITU's report also found that mobile phone penetration in Africa extended to 6.2 per 100 inhabitants by the end of 2003 while fixed-line penetration stood only at 3 per 100 inhabitants. By 2003, almost 70 per cent of telephone subscribers in Africa were using mobile phones. In sub-Saharan Africa, three out of four subscriptions were for mobile phone users, 'the highest ratio of mobile to total telephone subscribers of any region in the world' (ITU 2004:1). The report adds that the annual average growth rate of mobile phone use in Africa is 65 per cent, compared with 33 per cent for the rest of the world. As discussed earlier by Alzouma (2005), this report and the accompanying figures show a remarkable and perhaps unprecedented pace and scale of adoption of a new technology in Africa. For example, between 2000 and 2004 there have been more mobile phone connections in Africa than land-line connections in the entire past century (ITU 2004).

What are the factors that help explain the popularity of mobile phones in African countries? Is this popularity the result of low costs or easier access or the result of more profound cultural determinants? More importantly, is mobile phone use changing Africans' relationships with one another? Is it changing communication styles? Although this study is limited to the case of Niger, it seeks to partially answer those questions by examining everyday use of mobile phones in that part of Africa.

Methodology

This research was undertaken as a qualitative exercise between 2003 and 2004. It focused on the participants' perceptions, subjectivities, experiences, and realities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using 'interview guides.' These guides list the issues to be discussed during the interview, but these issues were only used as references. The process and the course of the interviews depended on the interaction between the researcher and the interviewees. Priority was given to flexibility in that the conversations were neither limited nor subjected to a fixed and predetermined set of themes and questions. However, the discussions met the objectives of the research.

The author interviewed 20 mobile phone users. They were randomly selected from pre-paid telephone card buyers. The author stood in front of stores that sold pre-paid telephone cards in order to meet all kinds of users. The interviews were taped, transcribed and, when necessary, translated. From data obtained in this way, the author developed coded segments of interviews which were significant for the research, using the headings and the list of questions of the interview guides. Thus, although the author proceeded inductively to interpret and structure the meanings inherent in the interviews, the structure of the interpretation was derived from the structure of the interviews themselves. The author also included individual case studies to illustrate the ways in which people in Niger use mobile phones. Although a sample representativeness (in a quantative sense) was not sought in this study, the author was careful to ensure that the data described mobile phones and mobile phone use in Niger.

Mobile Telephones in Niger

The first mobile phones in Niger were promoted and sold by the Société Nigérienne de Télécommunication (SONITEL). In Niger, mobile phones were introduced and became popular about the same time as the Internet (1997-1998). Most of SONITEL's first clients were embassies and international organizations, because mobile phones were very expensive. According to a report by Touraoua and Tidjani in Sahel Dimanche, Niger's governmental-owned daily newspaper (1998), the cost of a mobile phone was 215,000 CFA francs (approximately US$450) for a one-year domestic subscription and 365,000 CFA francs (approximately US$750) for an international subscription. Therefore, by the time they were introduced, mobile phones were beyond the means of the average Nigerien whose annual income did not exceed US$250. However, in a very short time,

mobile phones were on sale on the streets of Niamey and in shops. Vendors imported most of the phones from Dubai and some other countries such as Thailand and Hong Kong. More interestingly, a few private Global Systems for Mobile Communication (GSM) operators, TELECEL, CELTEL, and SAHELCOM gained access to the Nigerien market. Along with SONITEL, they are now the country's main mobile telephone service providers. Today, CELTEL boasts more than 350,000 subscribers with a national coverage of 54 per cent of the surface area of the country. According to a recent press release (APA 2007), this figure is expected to rise to 85 per cent by 2008 with 200 localities and their rural surroundings. As for the second operator, TELECEL, it covers 34 towns in Niger and had approximately 40,000 subscribers by the end of 2005 while SAHELCOM had 38,000 subscribers (CIPACO 2007). All of these companies are still growing.

Callers use pre-paid telephone cards instead of annual or monthly subscriptions. Pre-paid telephone cards are sold almost everywhere in towns by street vendors and shopkeepers. Their price goes from 200 CFA francs (approximately 50 US cents) to 10,000 CFA francs (US $20) making them affordable for most people. People who do not have enough money to buy pre-paid telephone cards usually have recourse to what is called the 'bip' in Niger. It consists of calling someone and then disconnecting after it starts ringing so that the caller can return the call if he or she has enough credit. In some parts of Africa such as Nigeria and Ghana, this practice is known as 'flash'.

Mobile Phone Users in Niger

Of the 20 mobile phone users interviewed, only three were female. Niger is a Muslim country in which most women are confined to their homes and, when they are not, are reluctant to talk to men who are not related to them. Therefore, in Niamey, the city in which the survey was administered, one is likely to meet and interview more males than females. Women are also poorer than men in Niger (Poverty Reduction Strategy paper 2002), and their access to technology and other services is limited.

It is also important to note that, although many young people own mobile phones, adults are more likely to buy mobile phones, as adults have more earning power. According to the UNCCD (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification), 'in Niger, 63 per cent of its population live in poverty and 50 per cent are under age 15. Poverty has left 32 per cent of its youth unemployed and constrained to urban exodus.' (UNCCD 2007) Most young people do not have their own income. In contrast, all of the

adults that were interviewed were employed (e.g. traders, civil servants, retailers, or engineers). Most were over the age of 35. None was younger than 21 and none was older than 57.

The interviews covered the following topics. The first one dealt with how mobile phones help to maintain or reproduce relationships. The introduction of a technology in a given society has been shown to affect its social organization, especially when the purpose of that new technology is communication. In this perspective, one can hypothesize that the introduction of mobile phones may have inevitable consequences in social settings such as Niger, mostly dominated by oral communication and face-to-face relationships. Related questions focused on how mobile phones affected intimate relationships and whether they helped people to develop new relationships in what Pertierra et al. (2002:2) call 'expanded spatio-temporal contexts'. Another important objective of the research was to see if mobile phones had consequences for 'discursive practices' (Pertierra et al. 2002) and for the individual and social management of time.

Before analyzing the reasons given by subscribers for using mobile phones, some case studies of users are presented in order to describe them, their motives and their social conditions.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Rakia

Rakia is a 22-year-old woman living in Niamey. She is a computer assistant with a college degree. She says that she knows a lot of people who use mobile phones. She bought a mobile phone because she said she could not afford to visit her distant relatives. As some of her relatives do not live in Niamey, she reasoned she could communicate with them on her mobile phone.

When asked how she uses her mobile phone, she responded: 'to get in touch with friends, relatives, and other acquaintances.' She added: 'On my mobile phone, I talk about everything; all topics are covered, from A to Z.' However, and surprisingly, she claimed that she rarely spent more than three minutes on the phone because the pre-paid telephone card costs between 500 and 10,000 CFA francs (US $1-20), which she said was expensive for her. She said communicating by e-mail was cheaper. In this context, her mobile phone conversations are not as long as her face-to-face communication. She prefers these shorter exchanges. What the mobile phone has changed the most in her life, according to her, is the possibility of having more intimate and candid conversations. 'Me, honestly, now

that I am used to talking with mobile phone, I prefer using it because in face-to-face conversation, it is difficult to say everything you want while with the mobile phone you can.'

She also claims that the mobile phone helps her to make new friends and to strengthen old relationships because she speaks more frequently with them on her mobile phone than she would if they lived in her town. More important, she is more 'relaxed' when talking on the phone with her parents, even about sensitive issues. She said she didn't have a pressing need for a mobile phone when she bought it (although she sees the necessity today) but she still proceeded to buy one because so many people around her already had mobile phones. She said: 'I had not the means to buy a mobile phone, but I decided to buy one because I saw everybody around buying one.'

Case Study 2: Ibrahim

Ibrahim is a civil servant in the Ministry of Education. He is 36 years old and holds a postgraduate degree in education. He is married and lives in Niamey with his family. Not many of his relatives use mobile phones, and he got one to communicate with a friend and business colleague living in Algeria. Ibrahim takes care of business activities in Niger. Indeed, his friend bought the mobile phone for him. He said, 'the success of mobile phones is due to the fact that it helps you save money and also helps you solve problems fast.' Maintaining friendship is the most important advantage he gained from the use of a mobile phone. He describes his mobile phone conversations as 'usually very brief.' 'We use a special language. We do not waste time, and we go to the core of the talk very quickly. We do not have sufficient time because, well, we think about the cost aspect of long conversations, which means that we communicate very quickly. There is no sufficient time for long discussions.'

Obviously, the mobile phone changed Ibrahim's conversational style, reducing the time he spends talking and what he talks about. Ibrahim calls this 'a new way of communicating', which is characterized by a specific way of organizing the message so that the essentials can be conveyed quickly. 'There are also some topics one cannot talk about in face-to-face conversations. The topic may be embarrassing; so it is better to talk about them on the phone. But when it comes to some burning issues, I prefer meeting with my interlocutor; it is, I think, a more convincing way.'

Case Study 3: Abdou

Abdou is a petty trader who has never been to French-style school. He is 35 years old. He is married and lives in Niamey. Many of his relatives and acquaintances use mobile phones. He, too, uses a mobile phone to maintain friendship, to call his relatives in case of social events and to conduct business. He finds the duration of conversations quite insufficient 'because sometimes I have a lot to say and I have not enough money to afford time-consuming conversations.' For him, the advantage of using mobile phones over face-to-face communication is that 'when you want to tell someone something a bit embarrassing, using the mobile phone is better.' Besides, as he has no means of transportation, the mobile phone helps him to save time: 'In the past, I had to go from one place to another for any need of communication I had. Now, I just pick up my phone and call.'

Reasons For Mobile Phone Use

Several practical and economic reasons can explain the rapid spread and adoption of mobile phones in Niger. All of our interviewees insist on the easy access they now have to their relatives, business partners, friends and other people in Niger and abroad. In Niger, where only a few people own cars and have access to other means of transportation, for their users, mobile phones have eliminated the necessity to walk long distances to meet others.

> With the mobile phone, I can now contact relatives, not just those who are in Niamey, but even those who live in distant places and beyond, in Europe, in America…. (Rakia, female, 22).

> It helps me reach directly my relatives without any waste of time, without spending my money for taxi…. (Matthew, male, 32).

> People use mobile phones because they are of a great assistance. For instance, if I am in a different place and a client is somewhere else, I can call him or her to tell them about the last price of a house and the person at the other end of the wire may agree or disagree and propose a different place. So, I will not have to go anywhere unless it is absolutely necessary (Murtala, 57, male, house vendor).

Interviewees therefore claim they have adopted mobile phones for practical reasons. However, what we usually might consider 'practical' does not itself escape explanation. 'Practicality' is in line with what Bourdieu (1990) calls habitus, the set of integrated dispositions acquired through education and experience and which govern our ways of behaving, seeing and understanding the world. In other words, the willingness to acquire

and to use new technologies and even the 'need' expressed for them is not inscribed in us. We are socially determined to express our 'needs' and tastes. Why do we prefer mobile phones to fixed lines or even face-to-face communication? Is it an economic necessity? Is it fashion? Is it an easier or more 'modern' means of social exchange? Is there something in Niger's culture which predisposes its people to choose mobile phones? Or are Nigeriens the slaves of marketing strategies that are promoting new modes of consumption?

This study shows that mobile phones have not replaced ancient or traditional ways of communication in Niger; they merely expanded them. Face-to-face conversations, oral communication in general, in addition to other ways of communicating, coexist with mobile phones. They neither disappeared nor receded with the introduction of mobile phones. Rather, they continue to occupy the same place in Nigeriens' social life. However, social relationships (at least among some users) have been reframed by the use of this new technological device as shown by some responses from the interviewees:

> Now I move less, even for my work and family. This is a good point, right? Another thing is with the mobile phone, you cannot miss the person you want to talk to (Adamou, male, 36 years old).

> When I did not have a mobile phone, I was always absent from home because I had to go and meet people. Now I stay longer at home because I can solve my problems without going out (Mariama, female, 21 years old).

> The difference between face-to-face conversation and conversation on the mobile phone is that you can now talk about issues you would find hard to abode [sic] if your interlocutor is physically present, especially in our society where there are many taboos, and people whose physical contact one has to avoid (Abdou, male, 25, petty trader).

Therefore, the use of mobile phones apparently proceeds from a selective process rooted in social representations. As shown by Lewis and Samoff (1992) and Uimonen (2003), among the highly educated elite of Africa, the ownership and use of digital technologies are usually associated with 'modernity' and 'development'. In the same way, in Niger, fear of 'lagging behind' (as expressed by Lally, 2002) and the desire to stay in touch with the family are powerful incentives for acquiring and using mobile phones, which are viewed as instruments of sociality (as stated in the quoted passages above by Rakia, 22, female and Matthew, 32, male). In addition, there is certainly something in the mobile phone design which is

compatible with Nigeriens' habits and social dispositions. What could this be? A first response is to be found in the ubiquity of mobile phones. As shown by Geser (2004), they are objects which challenge the universal constraints of space and time.

A Ubiquitous Technology

Niger's mobile phone users belong to all strata and ethnic groups. They comprise traders, retailers, civil servants and students. Also, unlike Internet users, mobile phone users do not have to be literate in French or in another language to use that technology. Illiterate users (in the context of this paper, people who have not attended the French-style modern school are referred to as 'illiterate', although some may have studied the Koran) of mobile phones certainly outnumber literate users. Above all, mobile phones carry voice and therefore do not require the user to be able to read in his or her own native language or another language. Therefore, as technologies of communication, mobile phones pose no threat to African languages and cultures, they can be more rapidly accepted and appropriated than the Internet or even radio and television (which are not interactive and are controlled by remote foreign structures or government agents with their own agenda).

This is the case for Murtala, a 57-year-old house vendor, who cannot read or write French because he has never been to school. He can be described as an illiterate, at least in French. He said he used to believe that mobile phones were gadgets for educated people and 'authorities' before he discovered that he could have the same access to them:

> 'Contrary to what I was thinking, it turned out to be something for sale which could be found and bought anywhere. The price came down… as low as 30,000 CFA francs for secondhand mobile phones (US $60). Thus it is something everyone can afford now… In the past, I had a bicycle and used to run around all the districts of Niamey visiting and showing houses to potential buyers. Since I discovered that I could buy and use mobile phone like anybody, things are far easier for me.'

Many technological devices are status symbols. Their use sets apart a category of people either as highly specialized users, as in the case of very sophisticated machines or as a minority even in what could become of popular use. In any case, the mastery of new technologies often constitutes a barrier to other potential users. However, in the case of mobile phones, their user-friendly nature makes them popular. As Geser says,

> Multimedia functionalities (of mobile phones) are combined with significantly reduced size, weight, energy needs and buying prices, as well as by

> a much simpler, user-friendly interface, which makes it possible to be used by younger children, illiterate or handicapped people and other marginal population segments not able to come to terms with MS Office and W2k. (Geser, 2004:5)

Mobile phones are also more affordable than computers. Therefore, more people own mobile phones. In contrast, land-line phones in countries such as Niger were only accessible to people with high incomes. In the 2002 International Telecommunication Union Digital Access Index, which ranked countries according to their ability to obtain and make use of information and communication technologies, Niger had the lowest access rate to telephone with only 0.04 on a scale of 0 to 1 (ITU, 2002). Also, the authors of a 1999 paper written by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) note that in countries such as Niger and Central African Republic, only a tiny percentage of the population can afford telephone lines: 'The limited teledensity is also linked to the fact that a much smaller proportion of the population can actually afford their own telephone – the cost of renting a connection averaged almost 20 per cent of the 1995 GDP per capita, vs. a world average of 9 per cent and only 1 per cent in high income countries' (UNECA, 1999). Moreover, although land-line phones were commonplace elsewhere in the world, they were never owned by children and young people to the extent that mobile phones now are. By contrast, younger and older people, males and females use mobile phones, no matter what their social status or their moral behavior is.

Another important aspect of the mobile phone is its compatibility with the African household. How would a computer fit in a crowded house without designated living rooms, studies or dens? A westerner would simply assume that a computer will rest on a desk or table near an electrical outlet. Indeed, all familiar domestic objects, not only computers, are always represented in our minds with their assigned place in the house. These objects take place within a set of domestic objects which, together, participate in the construction of the way we manage our privacy and represent ourselves. For Lally (2002:9), they participate in a process of 'incorporation, negotiation, and objectification' which gives its full meaning to the notion of ownership which, according to her, 'is an activity rather than an attribute'.

Are all objects able to create this sense of 'feeling at home,' especially when, like computers, their design, use and permanent positions require social, economic and intellectual resources and abilities that Nigeriens do not have? Certainly not, and this is a primary difference between Nigeriens' use of computers and mobile phones. Computers require a designated

place in the house. A condition that cannot be met by most Nigerien users who, especially in towns for poor families, live in crowded houses. However, mobile phone users do not have this restriction, since mobile phones are small and can be put in any pocket, even the pockets of a djellaba, a large robe worn by Nigerien men. At home, the mobile phone can be anywhere. More importantly, it does not cost too much money and can be operated on portable batteries. This ubiquitous aspect of the mobile phone explains why it is used by Nigeriens from all social categories. Indeed, the context of its use is as important as its designated function. There is a social logic underlying the practical use of such technologies.

However, this very uniform use of mobile phones across social categories may have a destabilizing effect on the social order. As demonstrated below, many women in Niger use the mobile phone as a way to escape social control.

A gendered Technology: Nigerien Women's Use of Mobile Phones

According to the 2002 Demographic and Health survey released by the Niger Government, 98 per cent of the Nigerien population is Muslim, abiding by the patriarchal values of Islam. Therefore, the Nigerien culture can be said to be male-dominated. In such a situation, mobile phones may have a subversive potential because they undermine the constant surveillance and control to which women are subjected. In [some] other circumstances they can also reinforce it by giving husbands and fathers the possibility of keeping better track of their wives and daughters or even of checking who else they are talking to. Notwithstanding this, it can be said that women's sphere of privacy can be expanded through the use of mobile phones, thus empowering them in their resistance to patriarchy. According to some interviewees:

> There are disadvantages of the mobile phone concerning married people. Mobile phones are sources of several conflicts between couples. There are some men who give their numbers to their mistresses or girl friends and those sometimes call at home. This has created many scandals in Niamey. Of course, it is the safest way to flirt because none will know about apart from the concerned ones (Ibrahima, 36, male, married).

> Yes, sometimes I use the mobile phone to flirt. Most young girls use the phone to flirt; in fact not just girls, now boys use it a lot for that purpose (Ousseina, 24, female, single).

> Some married women use the mobile phone to flirt or to talk to people they should not talk to in normal circumstances. Now, all that women could not do in the past, they can do it and are doing it (Hassan, male, 41, married).

In the social and moral context of Niger, flirting is only tolerated between people who are supposed to marry each other. Married people and particularly women are prohibited from having intimate conversations with interlocutors other than their spouses. For all these reasons, it can be said that mobile phones make it possible to challenge or to reinforce gender roles, but not in the same way as other communication technologies do. Computers and the Internet, for example, allow for the possibility, not only of hiding one's identity in forums and chat groups but also of interacting simultaneously with many different people; to form discussion groups based on gender, interests or professions. In the same way as groups in the real world can be identified in the social space, those 'virtual' groups can be located in cyberspace. The mobile phone allows no such possibility. What is at stake in gender-related use of mobile phones is the control of the sphere of intimacy by both women and men.

Mobile phones introduce a new way of managing interactions, of avoiding the traditional restrictions that characterize face-to-face relationships. For example, Nigerien culture, especially among the Songhay-Zarma, is structured by the concept of 'hawi' (shame), which marks the relationships between first-born children and their parents, married people and their parents-in-law, young people and older ones, and women and men. Verbal exchanges, such as with fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law, are very restricted and when they occur, they rarely go beyond formalities, such as greetings. First-born children are prohibited from calling their parents by their first names and vice versa. Speaking about love or people of the other sex typically is not done in the presence of one's parents. When children want to speak to their parents about some sensitive issues, they do this through peers or friends who act as intermediaries.

However, this 'shame' exists only in face-to-face relationships of people who should avoid each other in their daily activities. In this context, we can easily understand that mobile phones make these stressful relationships more supportable. They facilitate interactions among relatives by making the verbal exchange possible without the obligation of being in the presence of the participant in the discussion. This was apparent in the responses of some interviewees:

> There is a difference between talking on the phone and talking face-to-face;

> if you want to tell someone something a bit embarrassing, you can use the phone (Abdou, male, 25, petty trader);

> When I want to hide something, I prefer using the mobile phone. There are some topics you cannot entertain your interlocutor with in their presence; but with the mobile phone you are free to speak your mind (Ibrahim, 24, married, petty trader);

> The mobile phone is popular because if you have something secret you want to tell someone, nobody else can hear you. You can make appointments, date someone, and meet with someone somewhere without other people knowing it (Harouna, male, 45, married).

Thus, in the context of Niger, mobile phones give the opportunity to talk to people within a relationship characterized by the 'hawi' without having to be in physical proximity. It is so because the 'hawi' involves the well-known anthropological notion of avoidance which contrasts with joking relationships as theorized by Radcliffe-Brown (1940). The principle of avoidance suggests that some people of the opposite gender or some kinsmen and women, particularly fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law and children-in-law, formally avoid physical proximity with each other and even keep their verbal exchanges to a strict minimum. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, in Concepts et conceptions Songahy-Zarma (Nubia 1982), has emphasized the importance of the 'hawi' in communication situations among the Songhay-Zarma. In that context, it is understandable that mobile phones open a new sphere of everyday relationship management, especially for women, who are the most concerned with the 'hawi' and who are expected to show modesty and reserve in their interactions with others. Thus, privacy and intimacy are the main benefits of mobile phones according to the interviewees who mentioned the possibility of discussing sensitive individual issues without being subjected to the scrutiny of a society, which has kept most of its traditional practices, particularly when it comes to gossip and social control of individual behaviour.

However, this advantage is perceived as a disadvantage in some other circumstances, because of the possibility for deception:

> On the phone, anyone can change their voice and deceive you; but in face-to-face interactions you can tell whether the person is reliable or not (El Hadji Maazou, male, 42, married);

> Listen! I prefer face-to-face conversations because with the mobile phone, everyone can hide his true sentiments (Adamou, male, 36, postgraduate student).

To conclude, the empowering capacities of mobile phones appear in the alternative options they give to their users faced with social control and the need to preserve privacy and intimacy. For women, this means more freedom and autonomy, particularly in a Muslim society such as Niger, where most women face seclusion and restrictions when establishing relationships with men. Seclusion is required by Islam and observed by many families in Niamey. It forbids women from leaving their homes to receive any male other than their immediate relatives, such as brothers and fathers, or even to speak to a man. Thus, thousands of women live their entire lives without ever going outside of the family's home or having any verbal exchange with any male who is not a relative. In such a context, the mobile phone becomes a powerful tool for challenging social control because it expands the range of communicators beyond the family sphere, giving opportunities to re-establish contact with old friends, to date and to gossip.

How Mobile Phones Challenge the Disintegration of Urban Life and Reinforce Communal Ties

According to Geser (2004:3):

> The significance of the mobile phone lies in empowering people to engage in communication, which is at the same time free from the constraints of physical proximity and spatial immobility. As it responds to such deeply ingrained and universal social needs, it is no surprise to see the mobile phone expanding worldwide at breath-taking speed. In fact, there are reasons to assume that it would have been equally welcome in all human societies and cultures in the past: that is, under all imaginable specific cultural or socio-economic conditions.

Geser (2004) explains that physical proximity was a necessary condition for human interaction, while stable dwellings were one of the conditions for group cohesion over time. Although nomadic groups, as one of the main human forms of social organization, were an exception to this rule, they could not escape the necessity of physical proximity for their members to interact and communicate. Former advances in communication had the effect of eliminating the necessity of proximity, but not the constraints of location.

> Certainly, the landline phone has eliminated the physical proximity, but on the other hand it has preserved (or even reinforced) the need to stay at specific places. While there are conditions under which individuals on the move are at least able to continue face-to-face interactions (e.g. by sitting in the same train compartment), they have to remain at home or at office in order to be reached by remote callers (Geser, 2004:4).

By contrast, there is a perfect compatibility between mobile phone communication and mobility. A user can reach and be reached from almost everywhere within range.

The importance of such possibility for African urban residents lies in the capacity of mobile phones to maintain and to reinforce relationships, and more importantly, to respond to the disintegration of communal ties by urbanization. Indeed, one of the differences between the village and the town is that the latter disperses community members over a large area and reduces the opportunities to maintain daily contact and interaction. Such effects are accentuated in periods of rapid mass migration and urbanization, when poor populations, without the necessary income, are often obliged to settle in new environments which have not the adequate infrastructure. Thus, most of the interviewees stress that before they bought their mobile phones, they had to walk to reach their relatives because they had no car.

> I bought a mobile phone because it helps me reduce my movements. The mobile phone is successful because it helps reduce movement. Mobile phones reduce distances (Adamou, male, 36);

> Mobile phones are successful because you save time; you don't have to go and see the person; you don't have to take a taxi; so you earn time and money (Mariama, 21, female);

> You know that these last years, the city of Niamey has grown very big, and with regard to the cost of transportation, it became difficult to contact people; that is why people welcomed the invention of the mobile phone (Ibrahima, 36, male).

Most interviewees said the cost of transportation, the lack of telephones, the long distances and the time they had to spend to get to their destinations limited their opportunities for interaction. They emphasized the practical aspects of mobile phone use in a context in which maintaining social integration with communal groups of kin and friends is becoming more and more difficult.

It is important to note that the interviewees were referring to primary social interactions, such as visiting someone, contacting relatives or talking about social occasions, such as naming ceremonies and marriages. Therefore, if we exclude relationships with colleagues, mobile phones are used for personal purposes. Mobile phone numbers are given to family members, friends, other close relatives and people with whom Nigeriens expect to have informal relationships. For example, in the Niger region of Boboye, most of the men migrate to Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin, Nigeria,

Togo, Cameroun, and now as far away as the United States and Europe. Sometimes, they stay away from home for years, even decades. Some never come back, having decided to settle permanently in those foreign countries. However, since the advent of the mobile phone, many families scattered around the world are rediscovering and sharing kin relationships and a common identity they believed had been lost. How?

For many people, it is difficult to imagine an African village with mobile phone users. Yet, people in many African villages use mobile phones. In three small villages in the region of Boboye that are familiar to this researcher, namely Tigay, Bouringa Kaina and Bouringa Beri, one can find at least three owners of mobile phones in each. Most of the phones were bought overseas and sent to family members by relatives living abroad. They are powered by cheap generators bought in Nigeria and which are becoming commonplace in Nigerien rural areas. The same goes for pre-paid telephone cards which are sold by street vendors or shopkeepers in the remotest parts of the country. The few village mobile phone numbers are exchanged, collected by migrants from those villages and used to call home. Mobile phones in the villages have a collective use. Any villager can make or receive calls on them. Thus, seemingly lost family members can now be found and now communicate regularly. Any owner of a mobile phone in Niger can now talk to a cousin or some other kin with whom he or she had no relation before. Last year, this researcher added more than 10 cousins, uncles, and distant relatives he has never met before to his address book. All of them use mobile phones to call and to chat.

Similar observations have been made in Italy (Fortunati 2002), Great Britain (Fox 2001), and the United States (Bachen 2001). Pertierra et al. (2002:139) made the same observations in the Philippines. According to them:

> Despite significant cultural differences, a common and universal structure of usage emerges. Global forms of mobile-phone use are emerging; cell phones generate predictable convergences in their uses. Connectivity and mobility are 'grounded' in the state of unease generated by the modern condition (Pertierra et al. 2002:139).

Geser (2004:12) emphasises that mobile phones can compensate for the threat to communal ties in urban settings.

> The mobile phone can function as a powerful tool for re-establishing the fluid, casual modes of informal communication typical for traditional communal life, thus counteracting the losses of communalistic social integration caused by traditional media as well as the depersonalizations of modern urban life.

In regions such as Africa which are experiencing an unprecedented urbanization in a context of inadequate social services and public infrastructure, households are suffering the devastating social effects of low income and precarious settlements (ISTED 1998). In such a context, people resort to 'communalization' and tradition in response to the challenges of urban life. Facing social compartmentalization, people retreat to the protective framework of their community of origin. Thus, ISTED's (1998:13) report notes that in Africa, 'associations of migrants from the same village and the part of the family in the town, form the social environment of the new urban dwellers'.

However, economic conditions, as well as bureaucratic management of time and space, can prevent the realization of this desire of 'communalization'. The need to join and interact with the extended family can be impaired by the cost of habitat dispersal, cost of transportation, and lack of time. As shown below, the mobile phone does not surmount all of these obstacles.

Mobile Phone Use and Social Time: Changes in Discursive Practices

A superficial observation may explain the rapid spread and adoption of mobile phones in Africa in terms of 'vociferous traditions.' Indeed, such inferences have been made and can be found in several newspaper articles (Hall 2003). There is no doubt that the mobile phone allows the recreation of the patterns of communication in so-called traditional societies in which more time is devoted to socializing and therefore to speaking and interacting. Unlike land-line telephones, which impose spatial constraints, mobile phones are compatible with the more informal way of living, moving, and communicating that is observed in traditional societies. As Fox says:

> landline telephones allowed us to communicate, but it was not the sort of frequent, easy, spontaneous, casual communication that would have characterized the small communities for which we are adapted by evolution, and in which most of us lived in pre-industrial times (2001 web document).

In some instances, land-line telephones reflect a world in which people do not have control over the organization of their work and time, while mobile phones mark the advent of a society in which the autonomy to manage time and overcome space constraints is expanded. That is why they are more adapted to the fluid, informal interactions of African societies.

However, mobile phones give only the potential for such autonomy. Depending on social and economic conditions, the management of time as related to mobile phone use can result in very different patterns. Thus, all the interviewees stressed that they spend only a few minutes speaking on their mobile phone because of the price of communication. They all admit also that this is changing their habits of communication, forcing them to adopt briefer and more concise styles of communication.

> Me, when I call, it never goes beyond one minute….Now our conversations are brief…. The style of conversation has been modified…..you can't talk as you wish (Adamou, 36, male);

> On average, when I call someone, I rarely exceed one minute and a half. No, I don't think this time is enough for me to cover all of the topics of the conversation because there is a lot to say, but we are obliged to shorten our talk (Mariama, 21, female);

> When I call someone, it is usually very brief. We use a special language. We do not waste our time. We go to the core of the talk very quickly. We do not have sufficient time because, well, we think about the financial aspect; which means that we communicate very quickly. Conversation on the mobile phone is very expensive; so we don't have more than one or two minutes to say what we have to say (Ibrahim, 36, male).

Most of the time, the users would prefer longer conversations, but they cannot afford them because they are charged by the minute.

> 'Well, it is not enough, but we fear the cost! Otherwise it is not enough; but the cost is too high…Sure, it has contributed to changing the way we talk to each other. I have mentioned the cost; with the mobile phone, you cannot speak as you wish…. Therefore, we often use a code or a very simple language to talk… The mobile phone has changed the style of conversation, in the sense that we cannot make long sentences' (Issaka, male, 32).

The way in which people use a technology in a specific context is born of necessity. It is the result of a negotiation between the socio-economic conditions and people's needs and desires. In this case, users always make a call with the knowledge that time is running out. All respondents, without any exception, cite pre-paid telephone cards and high cost as a determining factor in the way they talk on a mobile phone.

This is compelling evidence that mobile phones are changing the patterns of conversation among Niger's users. On the one hand, the mobile phone re-creates pre-industrial societies' atmosphere of sociability, while, on the other hand, it reintroduces modern and capitalist constraints by restricting the time allowed for speaking. Undoubtedly, the rules of the

marketplace govern verbal exchanges, imposing a rational use or a rational management of time. In the process, parts of Africans' habits, when it comes to interpersonal civility and politeness, are being erased: 'We avoid long salutations,' says Harouna. 'The style of conversations has changed. People speak like telegrams,' says Ousseina, 21, a student. For Oumarou and Maazou, long salutations are a waste of time:

> 'I just take a few minutes, like three minutes maximum. I conclude the discussion quickly because of the pre-paid telephone card; it is expensive, and you can't afford talking for a long time…the mobile phone has brought a change in the way people interact ….the mobile phone has taught people to talk less because you think about the card, the money you are going to spend…. Yes, the style itself has changed because we cannot talk for a long time. We have learned to be brief' (Oumarou, 24, male);

> 'When I talk on the mobile phone I cannot take time because, as soon as you talk, within a few seconds, the pre-paid telephone card is finished' (Maazou, male, 42);

> 'Because the card runs out fast, I just introduce the topic of my calling and we go directly to the main point, without wasting time in salutations' (Maikassoua, 42, male).

This is an indication that new patterns of sociability and a new discipline are being created under market constraints. Market imperatives are dictating a calculated sense of time among Niger's mobile phone users. One can perceive some tension arising between the spheres of affective relations (the desire and the need to communicate with relatives) and the cold and impersonal relations governed by the law of supply and demand in capitalist societies. The first sphere is related to what Bourdieu (1997) calls 'the gift economy'. It is based on 'a denial of the economic (in the narrow sense), a refusal of the logic of the maximization of economic profit, i.e., of the spirit of calculation…' (Bourdieu 1997:234). In contrast, the rationalization of the exchange in capitalist economies, according to Carrier (1995:1), 'dissolves bonds between persons based on kinship and other ascriptive criteria'. The consumption patterns of mobile phone users are thus dictated by this tension which, of course, has affected the organization of both personal and collective behaviour.

For people living in such conditions, planning, or at least, setting predetermined conditions into which conversations can take place becomes an imperative. Communicators have to adopt more formal ways of interacting, and even invent a new language. But it is to be expected that when the mobile phone becomes cheaper, the result will be a more spontaneous way of interacting.

Conclusion

The rapid spread of mobile phones in Africa and particularly in Niger can be explained by the manipulability and the low cost of those devices. Another factor is that mobile phones do not require literacy. They fit better in the African domestic environment and are in accordance with the way illiterate people who need not know how to read or how to arrange a text perceive the world. With mobile phones, Africans can speak their own languages with the full emotional content and the rational, the logic of verbal communication between themselves and others. Mobile phones are in line with what Ong (1982) calls 'orality and oral cultures' in which, according to him, 'language, narration, memory' and the way the world is understood are all distinct from those of 'the print culture'.

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