

# New ICT and mobility in Africa

*By Mirjam de Bruijn*

My research experience as an anthropologist started in West and Central Africa: in northern Cameroon in 1986, in Mali from 1987 onwards, in Chad from 2001 and then in Cameroon again in 2006. It has always been difficult to pinpoint my research area due to the mobility of the people I work with, namely pastoralists, street children, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants, all of whom have a mobile lifestyle. Increasingly, I have been focusing on the connections between places, and have abandoned in-depth research in one place (de Bruijn and van Dijk 2012). I mean this literally. The 1990s were challenging and 'mobility' as a guiding concept was emerging among anthropologists. The idea that we could 'find' answers to the workings of society in places was replaced by the insight that we had to understand societies in space (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Clifford 1992), which meant that societies were being defined as multi-sited and mobile (de Bruijn et al. 2001). These notions of space and mobility were boosted by the emerging digital environment, and globalisation has become a central paradigm. The arrival of mobile telephony and, more recently, high-speed internet has dramatically changed the spatiality of societies.<sup>1</sup> This short essay reflects on mobility and the way we, as researchers, interact with our 'field' and how this 'field' is interacting with the world. When we view social change from a perspective of mobility we will need to reinterpret 'othering', one of the central concepts of anthropology. New identities and ethnicities are born out of this process, both for the researcher as well as for the researched.

Are these dynamics of identification changing or intensifying with

the advance of information and communications technology (ICT) in Africa? ICT influences notions of spatiality and distance. While spatiality in relation to mobile cultures was defined in the past in terms of distance and difficult communication, today it is part of the digital highway and that has given distance another meaning. But access to ICT also influences the way people send out messages about themselves and others and how these are received. It is important also to realise how ICT influences access to information, both about the other and about self in relation to the other. The notions of distance, portrayal and information are, therefore, three dimensions that influence identification in terms of ethnicity, othering and belonging in the era of new ICT.

These ideas can be related to my extensive experiences with Fulani nomads in the Sahelian area, specifically Central Africa – Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad – and northern Mali. The Fulani nomads form part of hierarchical societies in which they are or were a free group that roams with their cattle in an area that is protected of old by the hegemony of Fulani chiefdoms or rules relating to access to water points and pasture areas. In such a system, being informed about the condition of pastureland and markets is important. Travel itself has long been nomads' main communication strategy and their identity is defined by their mobility and freedom to move. Nomads therefore identify with freedom. This is probably also expressed in the way in which they present themselves to others, by adopting specific ways of dressing and arranging their hair, since beauty is an important marker in their society. They claim difference from surrounding groups. However the converse of this attitude is that they are also seen as 'the other', the stranger, by the societies in which they settle for a while. Being in the position of 'stranger' may invite demarcations in times of conflict.

Possibilities for movement have changed tremendously in the last few decades, and increasing population growth and pressure on land have forced nomads to move to other pasture areas or to become sedentary. The droughts in the 1970s and 1980s had a marked effect. Not only were nomads forced to move on, but they became a group that needed defending, which led to the emergence of associations to defend the rights of the Fulani. These associations were headed by

Fulani elites who used the image of the Fulani nomad as a vehicle to fight their own causes. Freedom and beauty have become important parts of the defence strategy of the elites and their associations. They have put the Fulani on a special plateau. Examples of such organisations include the international Taabital Pulaaku and the Cameroonian association MBOSCUDA.

While the experience of physical mobility has changed, the era of mobile telephony has introduced new forms of mobility that have also been embraced by nomads. The mobile phone appears to fit the lifestyle of this mobile/nomadic society perfectly. The areas where they live may not be the best connected but this is changing rapidly and nomads without a phone or access to a phone are rare today in northern Chad, central Mali and Cameroon. They use their phones to be in contact with their mobile community. Communication by voice and increasingly through music and film clips has also reached nomads who are often illiterate but certainly in need of information about the state of their country. The process of accessing information and greater contact between family members means people are better informed and feel increasingly connected to each other. Ahmadou and I first met in 1990 when we were starting our PhD project in central Mali.<sup>2</sup> His father became our host and, when he died, Ahmadou replaced him. Ahmadou was the first in his camp to acquire a mobile phone in 2007, and used it to contact me and people in the city, and to raise money for his campaign to become the political leader of his group, which was successful. Mobile telephony took a huge leap forward in 2012 due to the war in the region. Being the leader in this difficult period, Ahmadou was the spokesman for his people, getting information from everywhere by calling, but also receiving short videos on his son's phone. I am still amazed by these rapid developments and the way Ahmadou's position has changed, clearly as a result of what the mobile phone allowed him to do. Such developments were unimaginable in 1990, when messages were still being sent with travellers, on cassette or, in rare cases, by radio.

The Fulani associations have developed differently, accessing the internet space from urban centres in Africa and Europe, with their outreach growing enormously. Websites show their activities, networks are formed and lists are sent out and discussions take place



Ahmadou. ©Boukary Sangare

about language, culture and political issues. These associations tend to portray stereotypical images of the group for which they stand. In the case of the Fulani, these associations are including political issues that relate to the troubles that nomadism is encountering in many parts of Africa today. They portray nomads as non-modern and as victims, while their sites use images of their beautiful clothes and jewellery and typical figures from the ethnic group. As such, MBOSCUDA has succeeded in winning indigenous status for the nomadic Fulani, and Taabital Pulaaku has become a huge organisation that unites Fulani all over the world.



*Show of Fulaniness. ©Boukary Sangare*

These associations used to be disconnected from the nomads on the ground but this has also changed. Illiterate nomads are increasingly present in cyberspace. They are contacting people from MBOSCUA and Taabital Pulaaku, and internalising their discourses. Nomads increasingly phrase their situation in terms of marginality. Ahmadou has become part of these internet discussions, not as a member as he does not access the internet, but as an acquaintance of people who do and with whom he is in contact by phone within Mali and abroad. He has become part of networks that largely bypass his old networks as a travelling nomad. Today he is involved in global discussions about the marginalisation of nomads. Also the nomads in Cameroon have become part of MBOSCUA, which is defending their rights.

The individual adoption of the mobile phone and increasing connections with worldwide associations have given new meaning to the Fulani as an ethnic category. Processes of identification go hand-in-hand with ethnicisation and othering. Will these developments lead to the demarcation of borders that may end in conflicts? Or will the associations and ethnicisation lead to a different position for the Fulani in society, where ethnicisation becomes commercialised, is used in advertisements and, as such, definitively enters the global

idiom? (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) These advertisements and symbols hide a history of strangers, othering and belonging, that can easily be placed within a reality of conflict. □



# Endnotes

1. For publications from de Bruijn's project on mobile telephony and social change see <https://mobileafricarevisited.wordpress.com>
2. I worked together with Han van Dijk on this project. See de Bruijn and van Dijk (1995).

# References

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