

Programme Point Sud 2011-2012

Hello Hello Bamako! Workshop on the Use of Mobile Telephones in Africa

1st-6th October 2012

University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Report

DFG

Hello Hello Bamako! Workshop on the Use of Mobile Telephones in Africa

Organisers

Prof. Hans Peter Hahn (Anthropology), Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, Germany

Prof. Ludovic Kibora (Anthropology), INSS, CNRST Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Prof. Naffet Keita (Anthropology), Université Bamako, Mali

Themes and Objectives

The aim of the workshop was to discuss the research possibilities and priorities in social sciences concerning the future of mobile phone usage in Africa. The workshop brought together 24 participants (10 scholars, 14 students) from Germany, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Ethiopia, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The questions regarding mobile phones were raised through presentations, group discussions, and micro-fieldwork. The workshop was divided in three stages: the presentation of the papers by both scholars and students, micro-fieldwork (short field trips to improve their research skills) executed by the students in the city of Ouagadougou, followed by summaries, and finally, an assessment of the event. This report will focus on the following aspects: presentations by scholars and students, fieldwork by students, methodological challenges, as well as research perspectives.

Methodology and Results

The workshop began with the welcome speech by Prof. Lamine Mamoudou Sanogo, Head of the Institut National des Sciences et des Sociétés (INSS), and the quite moving inaugural address by Dr. Moussa Sissoko, coordinator of the Centre Point Sud in Bamako. On behalf of the organizers, Prof. Dr. Hans Peter Hahn insisted on the fact that the event was taking place in a context where everyone talked about the importance of information and communications technology in Africa, and in particular about the importance of mobile phones in economic development and social change. This formal inauguration was immediately followed by the first series of thematic presentations.

Presentations by scholars (in order):

1. Dibakana Jean-Aimé (France)
2. Naffet Keita (Mali)
3. Birama Diakon (Mali)
4. Molony Thomas (UK)
5. Fantaw Setargew (Ethiopia)
6. Hans Peter Hahn (Germany) and Ludovic Kibora (Burkina Faso)
7. Nacoulma Jacques Philippes (Burkina Faso)
8. Miriam de Bruijn (Netherlands)
9. Bettina Frei (Switzerland)

During two days, the scholars gave insights into methodological questions that they had explored through their research, as well as into leads that they wished to follow in the future (such as, for instance, the mobile phone as archive). Furthermore, they stressed the

complexity of the object, comparing the mobile phone to an air bubble, being in constant change and difficult to apprehend. After the scholarly presentations, the students were invited to present their ongoing research projects. The audience gave critical feedback, seeking to improve their work, following which the students were invited to execute micro-fieldwork in the city during the following days in order to achieve a better methodological grip on their research.

Workshop/Micro-fieldwork

During two days, the 14 students mostly carried out a study on the use of mobile phones in Ouagadougou (see blog www.alloallobamako.wordpress.com for further information on the fieldwork). The intention of this study was to demonstrate on site to the students the importance of the ethnographic study in research (observation and interview). Ethnography can be used to expose the interdependencies between different levels of everyday life of the user and allows a total understanding of the functioning of the system.

The results gathered by the students during this research project demonstrate the importance of the choice of method, as well as the complexity of the role of the mobile phone in socioeconomic changes. It is obvious that the results of this micro-fieldwork cannot serve as a definitive answer, but the main objective was for instance to raise questions to be answered and examined more carefully by each student in further research.

Methodological challenges

The reflexion on methodological interrogations was to be a key element of the workshop. One question was: Is it necessary to take on a specific methodological approach in the study of mobile phones or should one consider plurality of methods?

It turned out that quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary in this regard. However, this complementarity should not be the origin of confusion about methods. Furthermore, it is possible to call on different fields of study, such as linguistics on the study of text messages (SMS). It was also recommended to the students to let themselves be surprised during their fieldwork, to be curious and open in order to improve their knowledge of the research subject. Truth must be seen as an onion - it lies on different levels. Students must not consider the first data they find as absolute truth, each layer of peel can possess its own truth. The one that lies in the upper levels is familiar to everybody, whereas the truth located on deeper levels is much less known. Also, students must adapt themselves to the site. The ethno-historical or bibliographic approach (life history) is just as relevant. It allows redrawing individuals' past in connection with the subject of the study and to identify periods of change in the course of their lives.

Research perspectives

As it is shown by the fieldwork project, many issues have emerged during the workshop. The questions raised through the micro-research can be summarized by these research concepts and topics:

- concepts: archive, user, “exotic knick-knack”, “democratisation of mobile phones”, popular speech;
- appropriation of the mobile phone in terms of power relations;
- the use of mobile phones and issues of gender;

- appropriation tactics and the transformation in the social and economic fields through the use of mobile phones;
- mobile phones as challenge for the authorities;
- environmental issues due to the disposal of old telephones;
- national policies concerning information and communications technology ;
- health issues linked to the use of mobile phones.

The workshop was truly participative, and the response of both scholars and students allowed an assessment at the end of the event. As a matter of fact, the question about “the future of mobile phones in West Africa” remains unanswered, but nevertheless of great interest. The workshop finished with a round table, which allowed noting the satisfaction of the different participants concerning the relevance and importance of the information that had been exchanged during the event. The presentations were of much interest and stirred up fruitful debates, in particular for the students.

Dr. Moussa Sissoko expressed his delight concerning the seamless unfolding of the event, in particular as it was the first time that Point Sud relocated an event, and asked all scholars to commit in accompanying the students in their future projects.

Sustainability of the Event

The conference gave the chance to scholars and particularly students to experience mutual discussion in a productive environment. For the students from Mali and Burkina Faso, it was an excellent opportunity to present their work to a larger and competent audience, as well as to acquaint themselves with different theories and methods used by scholars from different countries. The quality of the research carried out during the workshop, as well as the presentations by the students and the pleasant work atmosphere laid the foundation for a long-term exchange in the future.

Participants

International scholars

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1. Prof. De Bruijn, Mirjam | Anthropology, African Studies, University Leiden, Netherlands |
| 2. Dr. Diakon, Birama, | Anthropology, Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB), Mali |
| 3. Dr. Dibakana, Jean Aimée | Psychology (and Literature), Ecole normale sociale, Paris, France |
| 4. Dr. Fantaw, Setargew K. | Philosophie, University of Addis Abeba, Äthiopien |
| 5. Dr. Frei, Bettina | Anthropology, University of Basel, Switzerland |
| 6. Prof. Hahn, Hans Peter | Anthropology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany |
| 7. Dr. Kibora, Ludovic O. | Anthropology, INSS/CNRST Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso |
| 8. Dr. Keita, Naffet | Philosophy and Anthropology, Université de Bamako, Mali |
| 9. Dr. Molony, Thomas | African Studies, University of Edinburgh, UK |
| 10. Dr. Nacoulma, Philippe | Anthropology, Université d’Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso |

Students from Burkina Faso, Mali and Germany

1. Bakary, Traoré (Université de Bamako)
2. Bonkougou, Boucare (Université d'Ouagadougou)
3. Fink, Jella (Université de Francfort)
4. Fofana, Issa (Université de Bamako)
5. Ilboudou, Wendemi (Université d'Ouagadougou)
6. Konaté, Rokia (Université de Bamako)
7. Koné, Bintou (Université de Bamako)
8. Lompo, Palamanga (Université d'Ouagadougou)
9. Magassa, Seydou (Université de Bamako)
10. Pilabre, Fatim (Université d'Ouagadougou)
11. Sangaré, Boukari (Université de Bamako)
12. Son, Adama (Université d'Ouagadougou)
13. Sylla, Almamy (Université de Bamako)
14. Traoré, Inoussa (Doctorant Université d'Ouagadougou)