‘À procura de rede’: redistribution networks and the gendered modalities of mobile phone use in Southern Mozambique

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Abstract

Mobile phones have made their entry into Mozambican society at a time of widening disparity and have been acting as conspicuous symbols of social differentiation by visibly distinguishing the 'haves' from the 'have-nots'. With ever increasing ownership, they have also become indispensable communication tools used to navigate a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. In this paper, I examine the scope and texture of the 'mobile phone revolution' in Southern Mozambique in order to shed light on contemporary dynamics of poverty and changing patterns of redistribution. Drawing on fieldwork I conducted in the city of Inhambane amongst young adults, I show how phone use plays a decisive role in the negotiation of inequalities. More specifically, I look into the phone's role in facilitating the consolidation and management of redistribution networks based on intimate relationships, while situating these dynamics within gendered livelihood strategies. I show, however, that, by making these networks more effective, mobile phones are also rendering them more extractive. In order to make sense of these dynamics, I present the perspectives of both young men and women by looking into some of their experiences with mobile phones in their everyday lives. I conclude the paper by providing an assessment of the socio-economic ramifications of these dynamics.

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'*À procura de rede*': redistribution networks and the gendered modalities of mobile phone use in Southern Mozambique

The title of this paper, *À procura de rede* (in search of network), refers to both the pursuit of cellular network coverage and the pursuit of social networks, in a livelihood strategy perspective. By exploring mobile phone practices amongst young adults in Inhambane, I hope to show that the link between both kinds of networks goes beyond a strictly semantic one. Not only are both kinds of networks fragile, fluctuating and at times unreliable, one also increasingly depends on the other to function.

In this paper, I examine the scope and texture of the 'mobile phone revolution' in Southern Mozambique in an attempt to shed light on contemporary dynamics of poverty and changing patterns of redistribution and accumulation. More specifically, I look into the phone's role in facilitating the consolidation and management of redistribution networks based on intimate relationships, while situating these dynamics within gendered livelihood strategies. I show how, by making these networks more effective, mobile phone communication is also rendering them more extractive. In order to make sense of these dynamics, I present the perspectives of both young men and women by looking into some of their experiences with mobile phones in their everyday lives. I conclude the paper by providing an assessment of the socio-economic ramifications of these dynamics.[1]

Methodology

The paper is based on 18 months of fieldwork I carried out in and around the city of Inhambane between 2006 and 2007 as a research student in the department of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London).[2] In addition to information collected through participant-observation, I conducted in-depth interviews with 46 young adults aged between 19 and

[1] Some sections of this paper are developed in more detail in an article submitted for the *Politique africaine* special issue on Mozambique. The article is entitled "The mobile phone revolution: a chapter in the Mozambican 'success story'?" and is currently under review. I also discuss the redefinition of gender relations in "Mobile phones and the "commercialisation" of relationships: expressions of masculinity in Southern Mozambique", in *Gender and Modernity in Youth Cultures*, edited by K. Brison and S. Dewey, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, forthcoming.

[2] The research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

29, concerning relationship issues as well as livelihood strategies, and how these tied into mobile phone practices. I also administered a survey on mobile phone use to 320 12th grade students in the city of Inhambane. The paper is also based on various interviews with key individuals involved, in one way or another, with relationship issues,[3] along with ten of my informants' parents.

The research setting

In the peri-urban areas of Inhambane where most of the research was carried out, residents live in close proximity, as land is scarce and expensive, especially since these areas absorbed many of the people displaced by the war in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The majority of the houses are made out of local material and cooking is done on wood fires. Most households rely on urban agriculture and/or petty trade, along with social networks to make ends meet, and many periodically face alimentation problems. Yet, amidst this precarity, a growing number of households now have electricity as well as running water, and cement houses are being erected here and there. Few of the young adults I worked with had founded independent households and most were living with their parents, often in women-headed households. Some were attending school, others had recently graduated, a handful had a regular source of income from employment, and many were "not doing anything", but all aspired to a similar lifestyle in which the consumption of modern consumer goods figured prominently. In this context, mobile phones have been acting as conspicuous symbols of social differentiation, by visibly distinguishing the 'haves' from the 'have-nots' (cf. Dibakana 2002), thus creating what has been described as an internal digital divide (cf. Bridges 2001, quoted by Nielinger 2006: 21).

When mCel, Mozambique's leading cellular network provider, started operating in the country in 1997, network coverage was limited to Maputo. Following the Telecommunications Act of 1999, which set the stage for the deregulation process, Vodacom[4] answered a call for tender and started operating in the country in late 2003 (Greenberg and Sadowsky 2006: 26). Since then, phone ownership has been rapidly increasing, especially in urban centers. For example, phone

[3] I interviewed the police chief, the secretaries of various neighborhoods, priests and pastors, nurses as well as *curandeiros* (traditional healers).

[4] Vodacom, which is owned by Telkom and Vodafone (UK), operates in a number of Southern African countries. President Armando Guebuza became a partner of Vodacom, through Intelec Holding of which he is a share holder. The announcement coincided with the declaration of Vodacom as "100% made in Mozambique" (Carmona 2007: 1-3).

penetration rose from 0,28 % (2000) to 12,6 % (2006) in the space of six years.[5] In 2009, mCel remains the main provider with over two-and-a-half million clients, while Vodacom recently reached the one million mark. This brings the total of mobile phone clients in the country to an estimated three-and-a-half million.[6] Looking at specific segments of the population, the figures are even more striking. According to my survey, for instance, 71% of grade 12 students in Inhambane were mobile phone owners in 2007. In this paper, I hope to show that, in addition to being a source of symbolic capital, the phone has also become an indispensable communication tool used to navigate a rapidly changing socio-economic environment (Vigh 2006), of which the 'mobile phone revolution' is both reflexive and constitutive. In other words, I argue that phone ownership testifies to socio-economic disparity while also playing a decisive role in the negotiation of inequalities, by facilitating the redistribution of resources, as well as by challenging gender hierarchies.

Desenrascar with the help of mobile phones

Many have shown that the implementation of structural adjustment, state retrenchment and economic liberalisation had translated into deepening poverty, amidst growing disparity (Hanlon 2007, Newitt 2002, Pfeiffer 2002). This perspective is echoed in the narratives of Inhambane residents, many of whom believe their living conditions have deteriorated in recent years. When describing their livelihood strategies, many use the verb *desenrascar*, a term which underscores one's creativity in resolving problems, often by having recourse to unconventional means (cf. Vigh 2006). Mobile phones are also seen as playing a part in one's tactics to *desenrascar*.

To start, mobile phones help in keeping families connected and informed, especially in places like Southern Mozambique where individuals are scattered for a variety of reasons including work, education, as well as war-time displacement. My research also indicates that mobile phone communication plays a vital role in the distribution of remittances,[7] by helping coordinate redistribution, and thus enabling those at the receiving end to play a more active role in the redistribution process. Remittances are then usually delivered through more 'traditional' channels, by the migrants themselves, by other returning migrants, or through the intermediary of young men

[5] Interview with Sr. Massingue Apala of the *Instituto Nacional das Communicações de Moçambique,* INCM offices in Maputo, November 13, 2007.
[6] www.mcel.co.mz and www.vm.co.mz, both accessed on April 30, 2008.
[7] See Horst and Miller (2006) for a Jamaican example and ISRG (2006), for a South African one.

working on public transport. In addition to their integration into redistribution networks that are essentially kin-based, my research also indicates that mobile phones are increasingly used to consolidate and manage other networks of redistribution which are rather based on intimate relationships, either actual or potential. These are the networks I focus on in this paper.[8]

When I returned to Inhambane for a short visit in the winter of 2008, one of my ex-neighbours, an old man known as Takdir, called me over. He looked concerned. "They've had to send you back?", he said in a way that sounded more like a compassionate statement than a question. "I'll help you then, I'll tell you the answer to your research" he went on to say, "youth here use their phones to *namorar* [to develop intimate relationships]. Some say that phones help with business but that's not true; phones are for *namorar*."[9] Of course, youth in Inhambane use their phones to do various things, namely to contact relatives, to coordinate meetings or to plan drug transactions. At times, youth also use their phones to place requests to others for various things like phone credit, school fees, transport money or hair extensions. And, like Takdir pointed out, very often they use their phones to *namorar*, to flirt, to coordinate romantic *rendez-vous*, to insult a rival or to impress a potential lover. I now turn to the gendered modalities of phone use amongst young adults in Inhambane and focus on the phone's role in facilitating the consolidation and management of redistribution networks based on intimate relationships.

Unlike men, women in Inhambane often find it difficult to estimate how much they spend on phone credit. Moreover, I have yet to come across a woman who had given up her phone due to economic constraints, whereas men who "take a break" from phone use are not uncommon. This is mainly due to the ways in which the costs of telecommunication tend to be unevenly distributed along gender lines. Phone etiquette mirrors broader social relations and tends to reproduce socio-economic hierarchies, namely the normative ideals of the man as provider and of the woman as dependent.[10] As such, men are expected to cover most of the costs incurred when communicating with women who, for their part can attempt to reverse the charges by sending a *bip* and waiting to

[8] It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the business opportunities directly generated by the phone industry, as well as the way phone communication may render small businesses more efficient.

[9] Conversation with Takdir, a man in his 60s, Inhambane, August 3, 2008.

[10] Phone etiquette serves a more or less fluid guideline and actual practices vary according to the specificities of the situation.

be called back, that is, by phoning a number and hanging up before the other person answers or by sending a 'Please-call-me' message, a free messages asking to be called back.[11]

In a group discussion on phone etiquette in Inhambane, Antonio, a 22 year-old man who had recently completed secondary school, made the following comment:

"Myself, to speak about my case, *epa*[12] I think that comparing with women, comparing with my girlfriend, I think that my girlfriend gets money on a daily basis [from her parents], but I only get money maybe once a month and I spend it straight away. Within a week I have no more, I'm done (*to tchunado*) but she has per day 50 or 100 MTn.[13] Even sometimes, she lends me money and then says that I'll have to give her back double, as a joke, you know. So she has money but in terms of communications, she only sends *bips*!!! And then I phone her. With the money she lent me yesterday, I bought credit, but she sends me a *bip*, you see, so I phone …Or you meet a girl today and she gives you her number. The next day […], she doesn't even phone you, or if she does, it's only to give you hope (*moral*) and then she'll send a *bip* and you have to respond. And to feel that you're a man *epa*, you have to respond."[14]

Young men like Antonio, and others I worked with, were auto-critical of allowing themselves to spend phone credit this way; auto-critical yet resigned and willing to play the game, and many saw bearing these costs as an expression of maleness (see also Batson-Savage 2007).

Most of the young women I worked with would send *bips* on a regular basis in the hopes of being called back and often with the intention of placing requests for specific things. To convince me of how easy it was to get things 'with her phone', Mimi, a 25 year-old woman, once made a demonstration. She started by sending a 'Please-call-me' to one of her suitors. A few seconds later, the man in question phoned back Mimi who then asked him to buy bread for her. Within an

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[11] Clients of both mCel and Vodacom, Mozambique's two mobile phone operators, get ten free 'Please-call-me' messages per day. Unlike with a 'Please-call-me', one needs to have a minimum of credit in order to send a *bip*, and there is always the risk that that person receiving the *bip* will answer his/her phone, thus "eating" the credit of the *bip* sender.
[12] *Epa* is a widely used Portuguese interjection.
[13] At the time, 100 Mtn was worth about £2.50.
[14] Group discussion, Inhambane, November 18, 2007.

hour, the man was at the door with a bag of bread. Not only had he paid for the bread, he had also disbursed for the call asking for the bread. Once he had left, Mimi giggled and said that men believe that "*pacieça ganha vitória!*" (patience brings victory).[15] In reference to such practices, Inhambane youth use the verb *chular*.

Chular is a Mozambican Portuguese term defined as living at the cost of someone,[16] or as taking advantage of someone economically, usually under sexual pretenses. *Chular* can be understood as a mode of *desenrascar* embedded into the local informal sexual economy. A *chular* relationship is similar yet distinct from a transactional sexual relationship (Cole 2004) in that the terms of the exchange are more ambiguous. As a young woman pointed out, "*chular* is a game. If you don't want to give sex, "*basta ter bom papo para lhe tapar a vista*" (you need to know how to talk to blind him).[17] In other words, women's access to material gain in *chular* relationships rests on the pretense of an exchange of sexual services which may or may not materialize. Some women will not readily admit to ever playing this game whereas others boast about their exploits. Women who are very good at *chular* manage to receive various goods like drinks, *espetadas*,[18] phone credit, clothing, or bread while only occasionally exchanging sexual favours. Mikas, an educated and well employed 31 year-old man, often complained about women taking advantage of him, of "enslaving" him, as he called it. One day in my company, he received a phone call from a young woman and already imagining the motive of her call, he answered on loud speaker. The woman went straight to the point and asked him for phone credit. After hanging up, Mikas started laughing: "I'm a fool, I'm stupid", he said, "I will give her credit and then she will use it to phone another man!". He then told me about a girlfriend who had recently contacted him to let him know that someone had stolen all her clothes. Mikas explained that he gave her money (1000 MTn), along with 80 MTn top-up so that she would phone him and have no excuse of not doing so. She did find excuses though and as Mikas cynically concluded, "Whenever I phone her, she is either on her way to church or to school!"

My findings are in many ways similar to those presented by Bagnol and Chamo (2003) as well as by Hawkins *et al.*'s research in Maputo. In Inhambane, *chular* relationships also tend to be trans-

[15] Field notes June 28, 2006.
[16] http://dicionario.cijun.sp.gov.br/houaiss/cgi-bin/houaissnetb.dll/busca?palavra=chular
[17] Interview with Carolina, a 22 year-old woman in Inhambane, July 23, 2007.
[18] Grilled meat on a stick sold around drinking venues.

generational and men who fall 'victim' to requests placed via the phone are mostly older employed men like Mikas. This said, younger men are nevertheless also asked to supply smaller things like hair extensions, lunch money, or phone credit.

Given the economic marginalisation many young men in Inhambane face, living up to these demands is often very challenging, if not at times impossible. And as the following vignette illustrates, some young women use the young men's shortcomings to justify certain practices. When I first met Bela, a 21 year old student, she was involved with a violent young man who regularly cheated on her. He would then buy her gifts and ask for her forgiveness. Bela later left her boyfriend for an educated 27 year old man who she described as romantic and respectful. She never saw him with another girl, nor did she ever find anything suspicious in his mobile phone. Her new boyfriend had a problem though: he never gave her anything. And as Bela put it: "If you see me wearing nice pants, it's quite obvious that it's not my father who bought them for me. But [my boyfriend] doesn't ask me where I got them. After a few months of seeing each other, he still hasn't given me anything, not even 50 MTn to buy *Stayfree*.[19] He never asked me where I get my perfume from. He comments on my hairdo but he doesn't ask me how I pay for it. He must help me if he wants me to look pretty". She concluded: "At least he gets upset whenever I receive an SMS!".[20] Despite being a good man (educated, romantic and faithful) he was not a good provider. And while Bela carefully monitored her boyfriend's activities by inspecting his mobile phone, she used her own phone to manage relationships that could help her answer desires unfulfilled by her boyfriend.

A number of young women I worked with in Inhambane have, like Bela, come to the conclusion that they could enjoy better living conditions by engaging in relationships with various men and have developed crafty ways to use their sexuality as a *monnaie d'echange*. No one denies that there always were women willing to exchange sexual favors for material gain and that had multiple partners. Many in Inhambane believe that mobile phones are amplifying the trend. "With mobile phones, *chular* is no longer just a game; it's a sport",[21] is what young men in a focus group I organized concluded. Others underscore the spread of practices that used to be preserve of a

[19] Sanitary pads.
[20] Interview with Bela in Inhambane, November 10, 2007.
[21] Sport is used as a metaphor for describing activities done in excess.

specific kind of women. As a Mozambican man in his mid-twenties explained, "there are two categories of girls –girls to marry and girls to play with-- but the problem is that girls, these days, are very clever with their mobile phones and all, and we end up not knowing which is which."[22]

Phone communication renders redistribution networks ever more efficient by helping bypass some of the logistical hurdles of face to face communication. Perhaps even more importantly, mobile phone communication creates an invisible realm of interaction within which such relationships can be negotiated away from the scrutiny of family members, neighbours and other partners. And so relationships are consolidated, that might not have been, were it not for mobile phones and multiple relationships become easier to manage. It is in this sense that gendered modalities of phone use contribute to the negotiation of inequalities. By actuating gendered normative ideals, or more specifically, by playing on their dependent status, young women can achieve broader economic independence. What is more, young men end up having little choice but to turn a blind eye to the dissolution of their claim to exclusivity, given that most do not dispose of the material base on which it rests. In sum, mobile phone communication allows individuals to navigate the changing socio-economic environment with (more) ease and (more) discretion by creating an invisible realm within which otherwise socially reprehensible practices can be negotiated secretly, at least until phones do just the opposite and provide tangible proofs of deceit, through intercepted phone calls and text messages.

And although *chular* is generally something women do to men, some young men are also giving it a try. In recent years, it has become increasingly common for young men to have relations with older women. Older women with money, that is. In Inhambane, this is still a new trend and one that is extremely frowned upon. Boys are told, while growing up, that they must never go with older women and that, were they to do so, the acidity of older women would burn their penis, a reaction called *gubya* in Gitonga. Yet some young men are taking their chances.

Sitting at a local *baraca* one Sunday afternoon, Lulu, a 25 year old man, tried to convince his friends: "Older women are nice", he explained, "they give you more affection, as if you were their son. One just bought me this phone". By getting involved with older women, young men are getting

[22] Interview with a young man in Inhambane, August 15, 2007.

access to a nicer lifestyle, while also revolting against younger women who often have little consideration for young men without *mola* (colloquial: cash; Portuguese: spring, i.e. *mola* that would help them leap to somewhere else). The topic has also been implicitly introduced through popular music. For example, Dj Ardilles' 2007 hit song *Khoma-la*, discusses one man's experiences with wealthy women. What is interesting about the song is the way it gleans over the fact that women with money are almost by definition older women. He says: "[well,] since she's pretty, since she's got money…" in an apologetic manner that suggests that he is doing something that others might condemn. The signer then justifies his actions by saying that he does not wish to contribute to dire poverty and that he is, after all, a 'player'.

Mobile phones therefore come at a time when nuptiality, household formation dynamics and broader gender relations are being redefined, alongside changing consumption patterns. Mobile phones are also seen by many as exacerbating these transformations. Patterns of phone use can therefore be seen as both reflective and constitutive of broader socio-economic reconfigurations.

Conclusion

Thanks to mobile telecommunication, pre-existing kin-based redistribution networks are rendered more efficient and new ones, based on intimate relationships, are more easily created and managed. Given the gendered modalities of phone use, mobile phone practices could be seen as leveling unequal access to resources along gender and generational lines. Whether the exchange of sexual favours (or even only the pretence of) for material gain qualifies as poverty alleviation is, however, a contentious issue. When considering the potential impacts of these increasingly important relationships on the transmission of HIV/Aids, the long term implications may in fact be tragic.[23] And because of its relative discreetness, the redrawing of gender relations underway in what I call the invisible realm of mobile phone communication also risks being overlooked by policy makers.

As I have shown, this is also only part of the story. By linking mobile phones to the alleviation of poverty, there is a risk of overlooking the fact that redistribution is a relationship, not an outcome. In other words, by making redistribution networks more effective, mobile phones are also rendering

[23] This is only a hypothesis as I have not conducted research on HIV transmission.

them more extractive for those who stand at the giving end. Various authors have shown that the prevalence of kinship obligations, or what some call the “economy of affection” (Hyden 2006), could inhibit development by channeling resources that end up consumed rather than invested to generate wealth (Hanlon 2007). Owing to the phone’s role in enhancing and transforming these networks, the implications are therefore potentially compounded. In this sense, mobile phones might in fact hinder development, as the resources that could be used for investment end up redistributed “through the phone” (cf. Horst and Miller 2006).

The entry of mobile phones in Mozambique may not promise to help the country “leapfrog” stages of development, as some have anticipated (cf. Butler 2005, Corbett 2008, Touré 2008, see also Nielinger 2006). I nevertheless wish to conclude on a more positive note by suggesting that the rapid and still rising adoption of mobile phones in Mozambique should be read as the embrace of a technology that is improving the quality of life of many in a tangible fashion by lubricating the circulation of money and other resources between those who have and those who ask; as well as in a more subtle manner, by providing individuals with a certain degree of freedom and control over their lives, by equipping one with the means to participate more actively within Mozambican society, albeit in often contested ways and despite the possibility that long term implications may be detrimental.

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