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USE OF MOBILES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN WEST AFRICA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY

Abstract. The following article focusses the consequences of using new media in West Africa, especially in the Republic of Benin. The increasing number of mobile phones and smartphones entails a lot of economic, social and political changes within the African society. The way of using these technologies is characterized by creativity and different kinds of local appropriation offering inter alia new chances of development.

Keywords: Mobile phone, social networking, West Africa, cultural identity, local appropriation, political and cultural changing

WYKORZYSTANIE TELEFONÓW KOMÓRKOWYCH I SIECI SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH ORAZ ICH IMPLIKACJE DLA KULTUROWYCH KONSTRUKCJI TOŻSAMOŚCI

Streszczenie. Poniższy artykuł skupia się na konsekwencjach wykorzystania nowych mediów w regionie Afryki Zachodniej, w szczególności w Republice Beninu. Rosnąca liczba telefonów komórkowych i smartfonów przynosi szereg zmian gospodarczych, społecznych i kulturowych w społeczeństwie Afryki Zachodniej. Sposób korzystania z nich cechuje się kreatywnością i implikuje różne formy przyswajania, obejmujące między innymi nowe szanse rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: telefon komórkowy, sieci społecznościowe, Afryka Zachodnia, tożsamość kulturowa, przyswajanie lokalne, zmiany polityczne i kulturowe

1. Introduction

The annual growth rate of internet use on the African continent is remarkable: A comparison of active internet users between January 2016 and January 2015 shows an increase of 14%. During the same period, the number of people who are actively using social media has increased by even 24%. Viewed from a global perspective, internet penetration rate is lowest in Africa. Compared to Europe and the USA, where the percentage of people without internet access accounts for only one fifth of the population, nearly 75% of the African population do not have access to Internet. In this context, it is important to note that differences within the African continent are significant.

The coastal regions of Africa provide greater access to the Internet than countries or regions situated in the interior of the continent which can be explained by the fact that the costs of establishing infrastructure within this area are as much as five times higher than compared to the coastal regions¹. The establishment of Internet infrastructure on the African market is mostly carried out by American and European groups, in recent years particularly *Intel*, *Orange*, *SAP* und *IBM*, but also by the Chinese companies *Huawei* and *ZTE*².

The major difference in Internet use between urban and rural areas is significant not only in Africa but all over the world and will most likely remain one of the biggest challenges for telecommunication over the next few years. According to a study by the Internet Telecommunication Union (ITU) from 2016, almost 90% of urban population do have access to broadband Internet, whereas the proportion for rural population is less than 30%. The proportion of Internet users in Africa shows significant differences from country to country. Internet penetration in Kenya is as high as 69,6%, which makes Kenya the country with the highest rate amongst African countries, whereas Eritrea's rate of only 1% is the lowest. Regional differences can also be found when comparing West African countries: In 2015, the country with the highest Internet penetration rate was Nigeria with 51,1%, while 19,6% of the population had access to the internet in Ghana, 11,8% in Benin and 5,7% in Togo.

Nonetheless, it proves to be difficult to calculate the exact number of internet users in Africa because the number of internet-ready smartphones is steadily increasing and sharing of devices is a common practice in Africa. Almost every African country aspires to improve internet access and especially mobile networks even in rural areas, while the actual funding of those projects varies greatly amongst different countries.

¹ Chéneau-Loquay A.: Quelle insertion de l'Afrique dans le Cyberspace? 8e Festival de la Géopolitique Grenoble, 16-19.03.2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuyhyAZ1rTs&t=2759s>, 10.08.2016.

² Wendt J.: Intel drängt ins afrikanische Smartphone-Geschäft. „Die Zeit“, 30.01.2013.

2. The Advance of Mobile Phones

Within the last decade, the number of mobile phone users in West Africa, as well as on the whole African continent has increased at a higher rate than prognosed by experts³: “The boom of the mobile phone in Africa has exceeded even the most optimistic expectations of mobile service providers. It is the “miracle” of a great success”⁴. Based on numbers provided by the ITU (International Telecommunication Union), Chéneau-Loquay estimates the increase of mobile phones in Africa at 77% between 2006 and 2007 and at 40% on average between 2005 and 2008⁵.

The number of mobile phones or SIM-cards has tripled between 2007 and 2014, while the percentage growth was the highest worldwide. Nonetheless every other person in Africa possesses no mobile phone and a third of the population hardly has access to a working mobile network. The number of mobile phones in Africa will not cease to rise: Demographical data and prognoses, improvements of educational systems, increasing urbanisation, as well as rising life expectancy lead to the conclusion that the number of potential new customers will stay at a constant high level for some time⁶. Apart from the aforementioned numbers and facts concerning the use of mobile phones, this research study focuses on the implications mobile phone use has on the cultural identity of individuals, groups and communities in the collectivist structures of West African society.

³ ITU (International Telecommunication Union, <http://www.itu.int/en/Pages/default.aspx>); Chéneau-Loquay A.: Modes d’approbation innovants du téléphone mobile en Afrique. Rapport de l’UIT 2010. Genève 2010, <https://www.itu.int/ITU-D/cyb/app/docs/itu-maee-mobile-innovation-afrique-pro-f.pdf>, 13.04.2016; Chéneau-Loquay A.: La révolution des TIC: du téléphone à Internet. Bulletin de l’Association de géographes français, Association des Géographes Français, 2010, p. 15-30, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00564186/document>, 13.04.2016; Hahn H.P.: Die Aneignung des Mobiltelefons in Afrika. Lokale Realitäten und globale Konnotationen. Object Direct. „Neuwerk – Zeitschrift für Designwissenschaft“, Heft 2, 2010, S. 34-51; Hahn H.P.: Mobile Kommunikation, Materielle Kultur und neue Verflechtungen. Ethnographische Erfahrungen aus Westafrika, [in:] Bender C., Zillinger M. (Hrsg.): Handbuch der Medienethnologie. Reimer Verlag, Berlin 2015, S. 153-171; Brauckmann M.: Richtig Verbunden? Das Handy und die Demokratisierung in Subsahara-Afrika. KAS Auslandsinformationen, 11/2011, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_5231-1442-1-30.pdf?111129100559, 20.11.2016; Biermann K.: Mobilfunk: Afrikas mobiles Wirtschaftswunder. „Die Zeit“, 08.03.2013, <http://www.zeit.de/digital/internet/2013-03/afrika-mobilfunk-wirtschaft/komplettansicht>, 16.11.2016; Hiller von Gaertringen C.: Afrika ist das neue Asien. Ein Kontinent im Aufschwung. Hoffman und Campe, Hamburg 2014; Vieira I.: Revue du secteur des Télécoms et des TIC au Bénin. Présentation du Ministère des Communications et des TICs, 16.03.2015; Kainz M.: Das andere Afrika. „Weg in die Wirtschaft“, 67 Jahrgang, Nr. 656, 2016, S. 4-6.

⁴ Chéneau-Loquay A.: Modes d’approbation..., op.cit., p. 1. The original french quote: « La croissance de la téléphonie mobile en Afrique a surpassé les prévisions les plus optimistes des opérateurs. C’est le ‘miracle’, indéniablement la grande réussite en Afrique. » (translation by the author).

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

3. Empirical study of the use of digital technologies in the Republic of Benin⁷

The Republic of Benin is one of the poorest countries on earth. Table 1⁸ compares the country in question to Austria, Poland and Germany. The comparison also includes mobile phones per 100 inhabitants and internet penetration rates.

Table 1⁹

	Benin	Austria	Poland	Germany
Rank in Human Development Report ¹⁰	166	23	36	6
Life expectancy	59,6	81,4	77,4	80,9
Human Development Index ¹¹	0,48	0,88	0,84	0,91
Mobile phones per 100 inhabitants	101,7	151,9	120,4	156,5
Internet penetration rate ¹²	5,3	81,0	66,6	86,2

Source: Own work.

From the early 21st century, the government of Benin started to create a future-oriented policy of nationwide ICT-development¹³. These strategies were designed in cooperation with local mobile¹⁴ and internet¹⁵ service providers and also included digitisation of landline connections¹⁶.

The biggest weakness in providing mobile services to potential mobile phone users is a massive urban-rural-gap¹⁷ and the low proportion of internet leased lines. According to Isidore Beau-Clair Vieira, who is responsible for ICT in Benin's ministry of communication, the most basic and extensive difficulties are that: "the Republic of Benin suffers from an

⁷ The interviews that are analysed hereafter grosso modo serve the purpose to empirically support the particularities of digital technology use in West African context that are cited by scientific literature and to learn how locals experience digital communication technology use and what kind of expectations and concerns they have in this context. This form of empirical research in the form of some interviews naturally is not comparable to anthropological field studies concerned with mobile phones like they were conducted in the West African region by for example Prof. Hans Peter Hahn (Goethe University Frankfurt) or Prof. Miriam De Bruijn (Leiden University). (Author's note).

⁸ Cf. Human Development Report 2015.

⁹ Graphic created by the author (Author's note).

¹⁰ The HDR ranked 188 countries worldwide (Author's note).

¹¹ The HDI is calculated with factors such as life expectancy, average years of education and the average gross income. The ideal value, that cannot realistically be reached by any country is 1,00. The highest ranked country on the HDI is Norway with a rating of 0,944 (Author's note).

¹² This value only takes account of users who access the Internet via a land-line networks. The much higher number of persons who use mobile-internet are not considered (Author's note).

¹³ This and the following statements are based on an interview conducted by the author on the 09th of July, 2015 with Dr. Isidore Beau-Clair Vieira, person responsible for ICT in the communication ministry of Benin (Author's note).

¹⁴ MTN, MOOV, GLO are the biggest mobile service providers in Benin (Author's note).

¹⁵ ISOCEL TÉIÉCOM, OTI (Omnium des Télécommunications et de l'Internet), EIT (Espace Informatique Bénin).

¹⁶ In 2014, the percentage of land-line connection in the Republic of Benin amounts to only 1,65% with even decreasing tendency. In the northern province Donga only 0,06% of the population own a land-line phone. The development of land-line connection, wich lasted for decades, was so to say skipped and immediately replaced by the mobile phone (Author's note).

¹⁷ The majority of internet connections are located in Cotonou and Porto-Novo (the capital of Benin).

extreme shortage of innovation and business acumen, while the circumstances for the education of skilled engineers are similarly unfavourable¹⁸. The Republic of Benin ranks at number 166 out of 188 in the Human Development Index. Nonetheless, the Beninese government tried to promote the development of digital technologies and the required infrastructure as well as the implementation of new media in the educational system with the help of experts and international support¹⁹.

The interviews that lay the foundation of the investigation of the meaning of digital technologies in the Republic of Benin are not analysed individually, but categorised and reproduced by central statements and content criteria. The interviews 1-9 were recorded between the 09th of July, 2015 and the 20th of July 2015 in Cotonou or Djougou (Republic of Benin)²⁰. Additional conversations with Expats from Benin (or in one case from Burkina Faso) living Austria or Germany were conducted between the 3rd of October, 2016 and the 27th of July, 2016 in Austria²¹.

3.1. Glorification and Demonisation: two narratives in the context of digital communication technologies

Like many technological accomplishments and other challenges to society, digital communication technologies are often associated with two diametrically opposed narratives, namely a dismissive-rejecting stance on the one hand and a euphoric-positive attitude on the other hand. The interviews that were conducted in the Republic of Benin showed not only great expectations and hope connoted to those technologies but also great skepticism. The latter phenomenon was mostly observed in surveys with older interlocutors²².

It can be concluded, that the assessment of the influence of digital communication technologies such as the use of mobile phones and the Internet is positive or even euphoric in West Africa. The vast majority of respondents see chances and opportunities provided by those new communication technologies. Only one of the persons surveyed focused almost exclusively on the negative impact that the use of digital technologies will bring to the individual and West African society in general and especially on future generations. In particular, the danger of fragmenting society was mentioned: "Because of these technical means, society will get granulated and life will get individualised while being accelerated further"²³.

¹⁸ Vieira I.: op.cit.

¹⁹ The most recent example for this is the establishment of „Bénin Smart City“ in the neighbourhood Fidjrossè in Cotonou in February 2016 (Author's note).

²⁰ The full text of the transcription of all interviews will be published in the author's dissertation (Silesian University of Katowice).

²¹ The interview with a man from Benin who lives in Germany took place using Skype (Author's note).

²² Cf. Interviews 1, 2 und 8.

²³ Cf. Interview 2: The original french quote: «Avec cet outil, il y a une nucléarisation, carrément d'une individualisation de la vie qui s'accélère» (translation by the author).

The predominantly positive attitude of the majority of respondents reflects the euphoric mood towards digital technologies in sub-Saharan Africa, to which Hahn refers with regard to the exceedingly swift distribution of digital technologies: “The surprising character concerns at least three areas: (1) the rapid spread independent of both global or regional development initiatives (2) suitability for daily use and usability, especially in rural areas where other infrastructural measures (land-line telephones, road construction, healthcare) failed; (3) the high level of acceptance by the population²⁴ .

3.2. Technical and Infrastructural Prerequisites for Local Use

In almost all of the conducted interviews the respondents pointed out the technical and infrastructural problems on the local level that arise out of regularly occurring power failure as well as low availability of mobile phone network in some places or very slow and insufficient internet connection in some instances. One of the biggest problems in the digital sector relevant to the Republic of Benin is the gap between urban and rural areas. This has been emphasised by Vieira, who analysed these geographical differences which represent one of the biggest challenges of ICT-policy of Benin with special vigour²⁵. Another interview partner²⁶ who is familiar with local conditions in Benin, because of his profession as a social worker, talked intensively about the undersupply of the power system and the inadequate digital infrastructure in disadvantaged rural regions²⁷. Almost all of the other interviewees²⁸ made the problem of regularly occurring power failure that pose a great obstacle in enabling unrestricted use of mobile phones and the Internet subject of discussion.

A very inventive form of local “adoption” of infrastructural prerequisites for mobile phone use that are inadequate when viewed objectively was pointed out by one respondent²⁹, who – as already mentioned earlier – is generally speaking very sceptical towards digital

²⁴ Hahn H.P.: *Mobile...*, op.cit., p. 154.

²⁵ Vieira specifically emphasized the efforts in reducing geographical inequalities in the country by the government like the subsidies of the development of internet connections or the supply of mobile networks by the state (Author’s note).

²⁶ Cf. Interview 3.

²⁷ Cf. Interview 3: „In the biggest cities of Benin mobile phones are used very frequently, in cities like Cotonou or Parakou (...) But financing phone credits is already a problem in villages, for the same amount of credits that cost you 500 [CFA] in Cotonou, you pay 600 [CFA] in villages, so you have to drive into town using a moped, buy phone credits and drive back to the village. (...) Similarly it is a problem to charge the battery of your phone, sometimes people have no access to electricity for three or four days and they cannot recharge their phone. There is no electricity. And you have to pay for recharging your phone. (...) Then there is the problem of internet connection, there is none in villages anyway.” The original french quote: «Dans les grandes villes du Bénin, on utilise beaucoup le portable, les grandes villes comme Cotonou, Parakou. (...) Mais l’achat des crédits dans les villages devient un défi pour eux, parce que le crédit qui est à 500 [CFA] à Cotonou devient 600 chez eux, parce qu’on doit prendre sa moto pour aller en ville, acheter le crédit et revenir au village. (...) Le problème de chargement du portable c’est un problème au village, des fois ça fait trois ou quatre jours que les gens ne chargent pas leur portable, il n’y a pas de courant, et en plus c’est payant. (...) Il y a aussi le problème de connexion dans les villages (...) pour l’internet, c’est impossible» (translation by the author).

²⁸ Cf. Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8.

²⁹ Cf. Interview 2.

technologies and the ubiquitous availability and accessibility via mobile phones. The psychologist and teacher emphasised in his interview that he more or less purposely uses an inadequate or barely functioning mobile phone connection to – at least theoretically – comply with the necessary requirement of professional availability while he is practically not or barely available and wants to “discourage people from calling him without urgent reason”³⁰.

3.3. Communication in Families and Communal Partnerships

Regarding the use of mobile phones and social media all of the respondents noted that they primarily use these technologies in order to stay in contact with family members and friends. The need to stay in touch with family and community is immanent to West African society and culture and also includes a normative aspect which is more easily satisfied using mobile phones, which also explains the unexpectedly rapid boom of ICT.

Isidore Vieira³¹ noted that the unrestricted acceptance of digital communication technology is strongly intertwined with the fact that solidary communal life is collectivistically structured in West African communities: “If I compare Africans with Europeans, you will see that amongst the African population, there is a certain affinity for those technologies which originates from the solidary communal life and is furthermore intensified by the use of mobile phones and, in some ways, by Internet use”³².

Moreover, some interview partners³³ emphasised that they are in regular telephone contact with family members and friends even without any special occasion, which means that they simply ask about someone’s condition or send a sign of life. The moral obligation to stay in contact with family members and close friends can be met more easily with the help of mobile phones, especially for persons who moved from rural areas to urban regions or foreign countries for economic reason.

3.4. Application-based use of digital technologies

The practical and economic value that results from the use of digital technologies like the Internet, mobile phones or social media is difficult to quantify in reality. Nonetheless, many interview partners, especially the representative of Benin’s Ministry of Communication, argue that practical and economic value is very high, mostly in connection to fundamental cultural differences: “To my opinion, we find ourselves in times of radical change as far as culture is concerned. (...) In radical changes of society, of civilisation. And within this radical change,

³⁰ Cf. Interview 2. The original french quote: „C’est pour décourager les gens qui me sollicitent sans que ça soit vraiment nécessaire”.

³¹ Cf. Interview 1.

³² Cf. Interview 1. The original french quote: „Je fais une comparaison entre nous Africains et les Européens. Vous allez voir que dans la population en Afrique, il y a une certaine proximité née de la vie communautaire, qui est à fur et à mesure dynamisée par l’utilisation d’un téléphone et dans une certaine mesure d’Internet. (...) On vit plus en communauté” (translation by the author).

³³ Cf. Interviews 1, 4, 5, 6.

those technologies play an important role. (...) Africa is still not participating at international economy. This [this technology] broadens the exchange of knowledge and marketing strategies (...) the craftsmanship will be online. This enables many possibilities. Tailors from Benin will sell shirts to Ivory Coast, Angola etc.³⁴. Apart from methods of money transfer that were often mentioned, additional specific economic-based ways of using digital communication technologies are stated by interview partners who are either directly or indirectly engaged in trade³⁵ or dependent on mobile phones by their profession, as for example the social worker Dominique Hontonou³⁶, who has the possibility to stay in contact with families living in isolated villages before his visits. Those statements from interview partners regarding the usefulness of digital communication technologies in everyday professional life reflect what is already proven by numerous studies and investigations: “Almost every professional activity is influenced by mobile phones. Contacting is facilitated and client relationships are strengthened³⁷”.

3.5. The Potential of New Media Technologies for Political, Social and Cultural Change

As already indicated above, the potential of using digital technologies, mobile phones, the Internet as well as social media with regard to cultural and political changes was mentioned in some interviews and was reflected several times by the interview partners in the course of the conversations. In particular, representatives of the Ministry for Communications pointed out

³⁴ Cf. Interview 1. The original french quote: « Du point de vue culturel. Nous sommes, à mon avis, dans une mutation (...) une mutation de notre société, une mutation civilisationnelle. Et dans cette mutation, l'utilisation de ces outils-là joue un rôle important. (...) L'Afrique ne participe pas encore à l'économie internationale. Cela facilite l'échange des connaissances et le marketing. (...) La culture artisanale va être en ligne. Ça offre beaucoup de chances. Des couturiers du Bénin vont vendre des chemises en Côte d'Ivoire, en Angola etc.» (translation by the author).

³⁵ Cf. Interview 4: „Because of the fact that I am a salesperson in a shop I often take photos of bags or jewellery and if someone likes it, it will be ordered. Sometimes customers send pictures of bags they would like to buy to me and I pass it on to the production team so they can use the picture as template and produce it for someone. The original french quote: « Comme je vends dans la boutique, souvent, je prends des photos des sacs ou bien des bijoux et si c'est bon pour la personne, elle dit oui. (...) Et parfois ils m'envoient par message les sacs qu'ils veulent et moi, j'envoie ça à la production pour qu'ils puissent voir l'exemple pour qu'ils produisent à la personne. » (translation by the author) Cf. Interview 5 as well: „The mobile phone is very useful for me and my commercial activities.“ The original french quote: «Le portable me sert aussi à mes activités commerciales» (translation by the author).

³⁶ Cf. Interview 4: „Because of the fact that I am a salesperson in a shop I often take photos of bags or jewellery and if someone likes it, it will be ordered. Sometimes customers send pictures of bags they would like to buy to me and I pass it on to the production team so they can use the picture as template and produce it for someone. The original french quote: «Comme je vends dans la boutique, souvent, je prends des photos des sacs ou bien des bijoux et si c'est bon pour la personne, elle dit oui. (...) Et parfois ils m'envoient par message les sacs qu'ils veulent et moi, j'envoie ça à la production pour qu'ils puissent voir l'exemple pour qu'ils produisent à la personne» (translation by the author).

³⁷ Hahn H.P.: *Mobile...*, op.cit., S. 157; Wasserman H.: *Mobile phones, popular media and everyday African democracy: transmissions and transgressions. Grundsatzrede beim Workshop „Mobile phones: the new talking drums of everyday Africa?“ des Afrika Studiecentrums. Leiden, Niederlande Dec. 2010*, http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/Carnegie_Wasserman.pdf, 18.11.2016; Rao M.: *Regional Hubs of Excellence and Innovation. Mobile Africa Report 2011*, http://www.mobilemonday.net/reports/MobileAfrica_2011.pdf, 08.11.2016; Biermann K.: op.cit.; Hiller von Gaertringen C.: op.cit.; Kainz M.: *Das andere Afrika...*, op.cit.

that a radical change within the Beninese society – not only at cultural but also political level – can be expected³⁸. Furthermore, social conventions within the society would change. Another essential aspect, especially relevant for the cultural development of the West African society, was the reduction of illiteracy, whereas according to Vieira³⁹ the social imbalance could be reduced but not eliminated completely.

The assessment of the psychologist Maurice Anagonov who focuses on the increase of consumerism as in an expected rise of already vast social inequality differs greatly from the mostly positive interpretation of the impact digital technology use will have on the cultural and social development of Beninese society⁴⁰. In a very profound statement, a student argued that due to global integration, the consumer orientation is dependent on the attractiveness of purchasing goods produced in Western countries, and therefore, the appreciation for local products from their own African culture will continue to decrease: “Culture is the image that is made by a society itself. If we literally imitate everything others do, we will lose our identity. (...) One has to remain faithful to his/her own culture, one has to try to improve, not to eliminate it. There is a risk that one loses his/her own culture. For example clothes... this [his own clothes] is not African, is American, you see? There are fabrics that are produced for Africa that are made by Africans. Around here we have a consumption problem, because especially Beninese people like everything that is imported. They hold their own culture in contempt a little”⁴¹.

Because of these very divergent statements of several respondents regarding the possibilities of change in the sphere of social and cultural relations that are caused by networking and network-based communication and also the subsequent long-lasting influence to consumer behaviour in West African population the implicit ambiguity of new media technologies is shown clearly. On the one hand they can nurture one’s own culture and – like the example of declining illiteracy rates showed – lead to further development of African

³⁸ Cf. Interview 1: „In the area of politics, for example look at the elections. All of the political representatives use social networks (...) There was one case where two candidates were involved in cyber criminality, one of them used the profile of the other, this was in 2006. This influences the political scene. These days social media is the space where political tendencies become visible. (...) During the elections I noticed that: all of them have their own Facebook page and communicate intensely there. (...) This transformation is well underway. » The original french quote: « Au point de vue politique, d’abord, vous voyez, les élections. Tous les leaders politiques utilisent les réseaux sociaux. (...) Il y avait une histoire ici, où deux candidats ont fait la cybercriminalité. L’un a utilisé le domaine de l’autre, ça c’est passé en 2006. Ça influence le milieu de la politique. Les médias sociaux sont devenus aujourd’hui l’espace où toutes les tendances politiques s’expriment. (...) J’ai observé ça pendant les élections, tous ont eu leur page facebook, y communiquent intensément (...). Cette transformation est en cours» (translation by the author).

³⁹ Cf. Interview 1.

⁴⁰ Cf. Interview 2.

⁴¹ Cf. Interview 8. The original french quote: «La culture c’est l’image d’une société. Si nous suivons à la lettre tout ce que font les autres, on finira par perdre notre identité. (...) Il faut savoir suivre sa culture, il faut chercher à l’améliorer et pas l’effacer. Il y a aussi le risque de perdre sa culture. Vu les vêtements, ceci n’est pas africain, c’est américain, vous voyez un peu? Ici, il y a des tissus qui sont spécialement construits pour l’Afrique, qui sont construits par les Africains. Nous avons un problème de consommation ici, parce que particulièrement les Béninois, ils aiment consommer ce qui est importé. Ils méprisent un peu leur propre culture» (translation by the author).

society and culture or carry the risk – because of virtual omnipresence of Western consumer products, media and the dominance of a capitalistic economy that is based on Western standards – of losing one’s own African culture and identity.

3.6. Value Shift in West African Society

The change of conventions and traditional values that happens because of the use of digital communication technologies is of course noticeable in West Africa as well as other countries and is explicitly mentioned by a number of respondents. Vieira⁴² argues in this context that borders of moral standards will be gradually moved, while Anagonov⁴³ describes the value shift in West African society and culture with a special focus on the young as follows: “My feeling is that there is a loss of traditional values [because of the use of digital communication technologies] like sincerity, truth, tolerance, transparency. These are the values that were very important to our family. Not only do they [the young people] not accept those values we try to pass onto them anymore (...), they also gain more distance to us. (...) This obviously undermines the role and the importance of parents. (...)”⁴⁴ This quite clearly shows the paradigm shift currently taking place in the traditional role of parents in teaching values to the next generation. This represents a special challenge to current African society and subsequently implies a change in collectivistically structured and community focused social order and its traditional value system.

Especially the departure from traditional values – that are of pivotal importance in collectivistically structured West African society – can be expected in future generations. Changed values for their part – as is also assumed by some respondents – can be accompanied by a change in self-conception, as in a new identity construction of the individual which is no longer centred around the creation of identity based on the belonging to a group, as the psychologist Maurice Anagonov explains: “In Europe there is the saying ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Over here it is ‘I belong, therefore I am.’ The existence implies the belonging to a group, this is the foundation of existence. (...) So, with these means [= digital communication technologies] there will be a granulation and individualization of life, which is a diametrical contradiction to African culture. In a few years time ‘I belong, therefore I am’ will not be valid anymore. (...) The parents are overtaken by their children (...) Now, with these media

⁴² Cf. Interview 1.

⁴³ Cf. Interview 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. Interview 2. The original french quote: «J ’ai le sentiment qu’il y a une dégringolade des valeurs traditionnelles, de sincérité, la vérité, de tolérance, de transparence, ce sont des valeurs qui étaient très chères à nos parents (...). Non seulement ils ne veulent plus forcément de ces valeurs que nous on tente de leur partager, de leur transmettre (...). Ils savent nous mettre en distance. (...) Cela enlève en fait l’efficacité de la fonction parentale» (translation by the author).

children will increasingly individualise themselves. (...) and they will create a culture that grows further and further away from the culture of their parents⁴⁵.

The interesting aspect of this interpretation of the impact that arise from digital communication technology use is, on the hand – from an African point of view – confrontation of Cartesian thought as the foundation of European/Western identity construction and the African belonging to a group as prerequisite for the creation of identity of the individual that is based on collectivist principles. On the other hand the question if, to what extent and in which period the granularization/individualisation of West African society will really take place or not is less relevant in this context but the realisation that the genuine, authentic African culture that is based on community, solidarity and collective well-being is perceived to be threatened in its very existence by digital communication technologies is paramount.

Even though the assumption that social networks and virtual communication could more or less seamlessly replace the mechanisms of communities and networks that exist in reality is made repeatedly⁴⁶ even by experts, there are – not only on the African continent – reservations and fears that real contacts, relationships and a true sense of belong to a community will get lost in the course of the rise of net-based communication as one interviewee stressed: “The use of these technologies causes children not to have the urge to get together. In the past one did this to fight hunger and hardship, this was why we got together. We felt stronger together (...) but I don’t think that belonging to social networks [on the Internet] is the same. They cannot replace this⁴⁷”.

⁴⁵ Cf. Interview 2. The original french quote: «En Europe, une belle formule dit ‘Je pense, donc je suis.’ Ici, chez nous, c’est ‘j’appartiens, donc je suis.’ L’existence c’est l’appartenance à un groupe et que ça fait qu’on existe. (...) Or avec cet outil, il y aura une nucléarisation, carrément une individualisation de la vie qu s’accélère qui s’oppose à la culture africaine. ‘J’appartiens, donc je suis’ n’aura plus cours dans quelques années. (...) Les parents seront dépassés par leurs enfants.(...) Maintenant, avec cet outil les enfants vont encore s’individualiser (...) et ils vont créer une nouvelle culture qui va davantage se distancier de la culture de leurs parents» (translation by the author).

⁴⁶ Miller D., Costa E. et al.: How the World changed Social Media. UCL Press, London 2016, <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1474805/1/How-the-World-Changed-Social-Media.pdf>, 13.05.2016, p. 192: „In conditions where people sense a decline in communal sociality, then the group component of social media may be seen as a way of retaining or reinforcing that group sociality such as family, caste or tribe. In many cases this is a quite deliberate attempt to stem what is seen as a decline in traditional orientations to society and to groups such as the family”.

⁴⁷ Cf. Interview 2. The original french quote: «La maîtrise de la technologie fera que les enfants n’auront plus besoin de la nécessité de se mettre ensemble, parce qu’ on se mettait ensemble pour lutter contre la faim, pour lutter contre les gravités, c’est pour ça qu’on se mettait ensemble. On se sentait plus forts pour faire face à tout. (...) Donc, je ne vois pas l’appartenance dans des réseaux sociaux [sur Internet] est la même chose, (...) ce n’est pas remplaçable» (translation by the author).

3.7. Results and Perspectives

In principle, the essential content of statements by respondents were corresponding to many research results and investigations that took place in several West African countries⁴⁸. It has been shown that there generally is (with the exception of one interviewee) a very positive stance concerning digital technologies generally and mobile phones in particular while endeavor to use those technologies better is undiminishingly persisting. The manner of use is shaped by creativity in dealing with several forms of specific and local adoption which partly differs from Europe.

Further development regarding the use of digital technologies in the Republic of Benin in particular and on the African continent in general cannot be prognosed in detail. It can be expected that the recent trend of the increasing use of the Internet, mobile phones and especially social networks, the rise of which significantly exceeded expectations, will continue for some time. This will increasingly lead to developments that were already mentioned earlier, like soaring numbers of digital technology users, the decline of illiteracy rates even for African adults and a rising involvement of digital technologies and forms of communication in economic processes.

The quality of development and change will, as it is the case with all technical innovations and accomplishments, be dependent on realistic expectations and the realisation that “the promise of digital narrative which argues that social problems can be solved technically”⁴⁹ will not be met. This hypothesis is supported by French media expert Annie Chéneau-Loquay:

⁴⁸ Cf. De Bruijn M.: Africa connects: Mobile communication and social change in the margins of African society. The example of the Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon, [in:] *Communication Technologies in Latin America and Africa: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*. Universitat Oberta Catalunya: Agecia Catalana de Cooperacio al Desenvolupament, 2010, p. 165-191; De Bruijn M., Brinkmann I., Nyamnjoh F. (eds.): *Side@Ways. Mobile Margins and the dynamic of communication in Africa*. Langaa & African Studies Centre, Bamenda, Kamerun 2013; Coenen C., Riehm U.: *Entwicklung durch Vernetzung. Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien in Afrika*. Studien des Büros für Technikfolgen-Abschätzung beim Deutschen Bundestag. Band 26. Edition Sigma, Berlin 2008; Chéneau-Loquay A.: *Modes d’approbation innovants du téléphone mobile en Afrique*. Rapport de l’UIT 2010. Genève 2010, <https://www.itu.int/ITU-D/cyb/app/docs/itu-maee-mobile-innovation-afrique-pro-f.pdf>, 13.04.2016; Chéneau-Loquay A.: *La révolution des TIC: du téléphone à Internet*. Bulletin de l’Association de géographes français, Association des Géographes Français, 2010, p. 15-30, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00564186/document>, 13.04.2016; Chéneau-Loquay A.: *La téléphonie mobile dans les villes africaines. Une adaptation réussie au contexte local*. *L’Espace géographique*, Vol. 41, 2012, p. 82-93; Chéneau-Loquay A.: *Quelle insertion de l’Afrique dans le Cyberspace?* 8e Festival de la Géopolitique Grenoble, 16-19.03.2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuyhyAZ1rTs&t=2759s>, 10.08.2016; Brauckmann M.: *Richtig Verbunden? Das Handy und die Demokratisierung in Subsahara-Afrika*. KAS Auslandsinformationen, 11/2011, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_5231-1442-1-30.pdf?111129100559, 20.11.2016; Hahn H.P.: *Die Aneignung des Mobiltelefons in Afrika. Lokale Realitäten und globale Konnotationen*. Object Direct. „Neuwerk – Zeitschrift für Designwissenschaft“, Heft 2, 2010, S. 34-51; Hahn H.P.: *Mobile Kommunikation, Materielle Kultur und neue Verflechtungen*. *Ethnographische Erfahrungen aus Westafrika*, [in:] Bender C., Zillinger M. (Hrsg.): *Handbuch der Medienethnographie*. Reimer Verlag, Berlin 2015, S. 153-171 and many more.

⁴⁹ Engels M.: *Die Rückkehr der Eindimensionalität*, [in:] Schirrmacher F. (ed.): *Technologischer Totalitarismus. Eine Debatte*. Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2015, S. 275.

“The analysis of projects [in the sphere of digitisation] shows that technology itself cannot solve social problems”⁵⁰.

The threat that there will be a significant divide between population groups that can afford digital devices and the cost of using such devices and those who will not have access to digital communication technologies because of economic or geographical disadvantages is bigger on the African continent than it is in Europe. There is a high risk that the poorest will be “forgotten” especially by mobile operators and other providers who have no commercial interest in economically very poor regions or in regions with very low population density. Because of this, special effort of responsible political authorities in West African countries like the Republic of Benin is needed to take measures that ensure access to such technologies is available for all. This is the indispensable prerequisite/the foundation to equal participation at global development and a minimum of wealth in many African countries.

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⁵⁰ Chéneau-Loquay A.: Modes d’approbation innovants du téléphone mobile en Afrique. Rapport de l’UIT 2010. Genève 2010, <https://www.itu.int/ITU-D/cyb/app/docs/itu-maee-mobile-innovation-afrique-pro-f.pdf>, 13.04.2016, p. 33. The original french quote: « L’analyse des projets enseigne que la technologie seule ne résoud pas les problèmes sociaux » (translation by the author).

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