Disrupting patriarchy: An examination of the role of e-technologies in rural Kenya

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> When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism. (Aidoo, 1998: 39)

This article considers the significant growth of the mobile telephone industry in Kenya and discusses the mobile phone as a potential tool to circulate grassroots (or indigenous) feminisms, cultures and cultural products. In considering the mobile phone and the utility of affiliated applications such as one of Kenya's mobile banking systems and their impact on social and cultural lives (an impact that may not be an intended or explicit outcome of the innovator's work) this essay suggests that this important advancement in technology, which surpassed and bypassed other technologies in most communities in Africa, must be examined critically, both in terms of the cultural shifts caused by the explicit *and* implicit transmission and exchange of information. By democratising access to technology, the mobile phone allows us to question established social assumptions and values regarding information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the assumed social and educational discourses that tend to dominate conversations about information in traditional media and dominant culture.

Introduction

Research on the use of mobile phones has been on the rise with the proliferation and the prevalent use of mobile phones, particularly in nations with limited access to other forms of ICTs. The research surrounding this work has largely been embedded in discourses of literacy, capitalism, microfinance, the "modernization and 'leapfrogging' paradigm,"[1] and linked to growth and economic development (Chiumbu, 2012: 193). However, this is changing in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring.[2] More literature is emerging in sub-Saharan Africa, focused on mobile phones and their use for political organising, and their effects on the social realities in sub-Saharan African societies.[3] In following this research, I consider the role of the information technology's hardware and software (the mobile phone and its applications) and how its uses have been and continue to be morphed into socio-cultural avenues that are inextricably connected to the creator/inventor, but also unique to the user. In this case, I study how the agency of the user can perhaps be used to complicate and problematise the oversimplified and sometimes pejorative and colonial depictions of rural black Kenyan women in economic development work. With this transmitter of information, there is a possibility to reveal the multiplicities of black, rural Kenyan women's identities, which are sometimes depicted as stagnant or monolithic. Here, I am arguing that these new users of ICTs are, in many cases, asserting their agency in using the mobile phone in ways that have previously been unarticulated or unintended by the inventor.

Bringing to the forefront a discussion about possibilities for circulation of the plurality and multiplicity of identities, modes of resistance and cooperation, grassroots and indigenous feminisms, cultures and cultural products, is not an assertion that such action is happening, nor that these are the only innovative imaginations that can be considered; rather it is the introduction of a broad overreaching question: What would it look like for the mobile phone to advance feminist agendas even as they are deeply embedded in patriarchal systems of capitalism? Given the history of the exclusion of forms of knowledge associated with women from the professionalisation of technological expertise (Wajcman, 2004), knowledge diffusion theory and scholarship on these technologies, how does the utility of the mobile phone and its associated services and products allow the consumer to be a producer or circulator of information and knowledge, while at the same time introducing a new set of hybridised communicative and cultural practices?

Could the mobile phone then be part of the conversations about ever-changing identity, where they can give voice to the experiences and realities of Kenyans as they decide and navigate their *own* destiny in relation to industrialisation and globalisation? In the end, I argue that although it may not be clear what is happening, "the social lives" (Appadurai, 1986) of mobile phones are important sites of possibilities and potential sites to circulate indigenous knowledge and feminisms.

In considering the role of ICT in more broad cultural terms, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) posit that these technologies serve both as a symbol and an aspect of globalisation. They write:

> They are symbols because they offer the most powerful networking platform for communication, information, education, democracy, culture, and business that is unrestricted by borders. As aspects of globalization, ICTs impact on mobility and communication and cause social, cultural, political, and other changes around the world. (p. 81)

These insights from Zembylas and Vrasidas highlight the possibilities and realities regarding the use of ICTs and specifically serve as foundational theory that examines culture and globalisation. Similarly, in his essay "Cell Phones, Social Inequality, and Contemporary Culture in Nigeria," Daniel Smith discusses phone use in Nigeria, in cultural terms. His analysis highlights how the mobile phone introduced an opportunity for more people to "participate in a technology previously limited to only the most elite social class" while at the same time exposing societal disparities (Smith, 2006: 499). Furthermore, Kenyans, Nigerians and other Africans using mobile phones have found ways to circumvent expensive processes related to mobile phone use. One such example is "flashing," where one user calls another and before there is a chance for the recipient of the call to answer the caller hangs up thereby not spending money but signalling to the recipient of the call to call the original caller.

The burgeoning use of mobile phones

Since the proliferation of mobile phones, there has been a rapid increase in phone use across the African continent with over 500 million mobile subscribers (Rao, 2011). Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana lead these phone markets and in East Africa, Kenya has the largest phone banking system, with users in Kenya showing greater "propensity to make e-commerce and m-commerce transactions with forty-six per cent of Kenyan [...] users

having made remote purchases via mobile internet, fixed internet and telephone respectively" (Rao, 2011: 27; Hughes and Lonie, 2007). The most recent statistics from Kenya's communication industry regulatory authority show that the number of registered mobile subscribers in Kenya now stands at 30,4 million, which is an increase from the 29,7 million reported in the previous quarter (Communications Commission of Kenya, 2013). Evidence of the spread and growth of mobile phone use is evident with the new governmental requirements that limit the number of subscriber identification module (SIM) cards that an individual can purchase, and requires a regulated mandatory registration, which involves a government-issued identification document (Communications Commission of Kenya, 2010). Additionally, although the use of mobile phones for voice calls is growing, there is also growth related to commerce and internet-based services.

One of the major breakthroughs in the Kenyan mobile phone market was the introduction of M-Pesa,[4] that nation's largest mobile-based money-transfer application. M-Pesa accounted for the movement of approximately US$8,6 billion in the first half of 2012 among Kenyan mobile phone users (The Economist, 2012). Through this application and its expansive network, Kenyans are offered the opportunity to inject capital into previously economically depressed communities, transfer money safely and privately, have access to money in their communities and make financial transactions 24 hours a day. Although there has been little research-based evidence to explain M-Pesa's success, there is much speculation ranging from the simplicity of the communication, pricing that is lower than other banking platforms, limited information required from users,[5] and more recently, the ability to register for the application M-Pesa on a SIM card, thus allowing those who rent or borrow mobile phone (handsets) to use M-Pesa (Communications Commission of Kenya, 2013). Whatever the reasons, the use of M-Pesa has continued to rapidly spread across not only Kenya, but also East Africa, and continues to draw international attention.

I introduce M-Pesa, because it is connected with accessing money, relies on ICTs and has been connected to the growth of mobile phone use in Kenya. Whether the phones are borrowed, rented, or purchased, there is an increase in SIM card purchases, and inadvertently a greater connection to larger networks of other users. With such widespread use, scholars like Sarah Chiumbu (2012) encourage us to think about the innovative and divergent use

of mobile technologies as illustrations of the "dialectic relationship between structure and agency and indicate that 'micro' social practices and 'macro' economic practices can sometime be interactive and iterative" (p.196). In this capacity then, outcomes of the use of mobile phones are not inevitable or predictable, rather, mobile phone companies (and their software technologies) serve primarily as mediators of the agency found when using applications like M-Pesa. Here we see the potential for the use of mobile phones in "an organic and bottom-up manner" (p.194). Following Chiumbu's decentring of the instrumental use of technology and the technology itself, we can begin to consider technology's transformative capacities by holding in tension the social agent's capacity to utilise technology and shape it in their use. Consequently, we see that social subjects and social systems are continually reproducing and reforming each other.

It is in this framework of tension where we see the user playing multiple roles, both as the innovator and as the creative user, and lurking in the background of this innovative work is the circulation of knowledge, not only from a "top-down" approach, but where individuals have a space to share and discuss information and create communities that are supportive.

Feminism in the local context

To consider mobile phone use, interruption, and diversion as feminist possibilities then one must contextualise and complicate feminist work in Kenya and Africa, in relation to third-world feminism, black feminism, western feminism, and global feminism. Furthermore, in understanding feminist movements, there has to be a move away from universalising representations of social change, and a move toward understanding the variation in feminist concerns, goals, and strategies and a centring of the localised agendas. I consider feminism with a broad stroke, as a project aimed at challenging women's subordination to men, and although it may be embedded in certain theories, methodologies, and organisations, I primarily consider it a structural framework in opposition to patriarchy and misogyny. As understood here, the goals and agendas of local feminist movements can be shared in multiple spaces, but cannot be dictated by groups external to the locale. Therefore, placing the mobile phone in this space has profound significance, and exciting potential for self-description, mapping of personal, social and bodily realities and as an imaginative resource in quotidian and unexpected discourses about female agency.

At heart of this is the historical consideration of the reality of the shifting conceptualisations of gender and the character of African women's agency. Although I consider indigenous cultural practices as important in these conversations, they must not be valorised or introduced as non-existent historical mythologies of the experiences of African women; rather, they should function as a reminder of the multiplicity of cultural experiences and understandings of gender, and as a move away from ascribed identities which often deny voice and agency among African women. This is only possible by giving voice to the marginalised, often silenced, women. The silencing of marginalised people often leads to the lack of nuanced discussions about the significance of colonial power and western imperialism while at the same time realising the profound reality that the feminist act begins when the ever-changing individual is given their own voice and access to the power to self-identify, name themselves, and to speak (Collins, 1998). This cannot be resolved simply by adding more women in legislative positions, or changing laws, because this only privileges those who are highly educated and of higher socio-economic class.

The changes are important, however, real change for more women involves understanding African feminism/s and women's histories; a project that is simultaneously embedded in feminist methodology and black studies, it is work that must be conceptualised within and outside of the bounds of classrooms, organisations and governments. It is a project of knowledge circulation and transformation that reveals the continued impacts of transnational, African, and local power structures. Oyewumi (1997) challenges approaches to gender justice that are based on universal assumptions about oppression of women. Following Oyewumi, who distinguishes between "feminism" and the "feminist," and argues that unlike feminism, the term "feminist," "has a broader reach [associated with] a range of behaviour indicating female agency and self-determination" (Oyewumi, 2003: 2), I consider the avenue created by the mobile phone. Technology in this space and conceptualisations (perhaps with the mobile phone or another emerging and morphing technology) where there are possibilities to challenge power relations (both local and global) and knowledge proliferation can begin.

Simultaneous circulation and disruption of ideas

The mobile phone joins the technological revolution that mediates the challenges faced by intra-national, intra-continental and even the international

dispersal of peoples in Africa. The mobile phone has joined previous telecommunication devices which "compressed the spatial and temporal distances between home and abroad, offers the contemporary diasporas, unlike the historic diasporas, unprecedented opportunities to be transnational and transcultural, to be people of multiple worlds and focalities, perpetually translocated, physically and culturally, between several countries or several continents" (Zeleza, 2005: 55). With Kenya's expanding mobile banking system, more and more Kenyans are invested in learning to use the technology in order to send and receive money both within the nation and also within the region. It also allowed for privacy never before seen in Kenya. Individuals could send, receive and store money virtually and had access to withdrawal services closer to them. This unprecedented influx of mobile phone use and the banking application has the potential not only to retain the ties between the dispersed people and their communities of origin, but also introduces a space where individuals can create and sustain supportive virtual communities. The mobile phone then is a venue of convergence of multiple practices. In the mobile phone we can find a point of entry into this broader discussion, which has had practical implications.

As stated before, what mobile banking then does, is that it introduces capital to women in a private sphere, which addresses some concerns about women's ability to make decisions about finances in the home, empowering women economically and socially. Here, "empowerment" is understood to have a foundation in grassroots organising and participation. This feminist conceptualisation of empowerment relies on justice, grassroots power and transformative social change, and is not purely predicated upon the injection of capital into communities; in this vision empowerment is not contained within the realm of capital and capitalism. The mobile phone also creates a reason to have avenues of collaboration, possibilities, spaces where women can have a platform to access not only money but also to make phone calls and speak to others. Furthermore, it also has created a growing mobile-literate population, and from my studies, this was an area where there was very little research available. Relying on Hall's critique of traditional research on communication as being linear by interpreting communication as a mere "circulation circuit" (Hall, 1980: 128), the mobile phone provides a platform where we see the circulation of feminism and communication paradigm shifts.

With changing political environments in many African nations and the moving away from a tendency for the usurpation of women's movements by entities affiliated by the government (Gadzekpo, 2009), there has been a flourishing of the women's movement in Africa and improved growth in research and knowledge production and circulation. However, in many states, these activities have long remained in urban centres, disconnected from rural communities. In addition to women being marginalised in legislation and discourses that impacted national social and economic agendas, rural women, limited by their distance from urban governments, have often been absent in the processes of writing legislation, making the deregulation of telecommunication, a revolution for all Africans but even more importantly for rural communities. Although technology is not gender neutral, a report published by the Commission for Africa reveals that there is evidence that more women are using ICTs, specifically to network with friends and family, to trade and to get information and news. Furthermore, the report articulates that the "mobile phone is creating virtual infrastructures and raising the possibility of unthought-of transformations in African culture, infrastructure and politics" (Commission for Africa, 2005: 32).

The importance of telecommunication devices and the virtual and physical feminist communities that have been created was evident during the process of drafting the constitution in Kenya. The constitutional review process was conducted under the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission Act, which allowed for a people-driven constitution. FIDA Kenya,[6] which was the most vocal women's lobbying group, presented a memorandum documenting the women's agenda for the constitution drafting process. This memorandum detailed ideas presented at various public forums and was drafted together with other organisations that were also interested in seeing gender justice as a central component of the constitutional review process (Maingi, 2011: 59). Entities like FIDA Kenya and Warembo ni Yes[7] concurrently undertook civic education on the content of the draft constitution, prior to the national referendum. On both fronts, their involvement provided a widespread collection and distribution of information, especially among women and other marginalised populations. With Kenya's low level of literacy, it was important to have public hearings to have meaningful public participation. These public hearings featured oral presentations with translations into other languages and clarification of the proposed amendments. In cases where the

public hearings format may have "systematically [disadvantaged] some groups or viewpoints, such as women or ethnic minorities," the commission also accepted individual petitions (Bannon, 2007: 1862).

During the constitution reform process, outcomes and opinions on the debates over land ownership and reproductive rights were often transmitted via text messages on mobile phones. Distinctive aspects of communication functioned on a model of production-circulation-distribution/consumption-reproduction, with grassroots feminist organisations communicating with women during the drafting of the proposed constitution and lobbying on their behalf, but also served as a space to educate prior to the referendum vote. Mobile phones, as a medium and not a force, fostered participation in Kenyan cultural life, in what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) terms "feminism without borders." Through well-established feminist organisations like FIDA Kenya[8] and newer movements like Warembo ni Yes, ICTs along with other communication platforms such as community forums were used to amplify the voices of women and in so doing bolstered grassroots feminist work and introduced innovative feminist leaders who emerged to advance gender justice both on local and national levels. Many of these leaders continue with the implementation work, even after the signing of Kenya's new constitution into law in 2010.[9]

What Warembo ni Yes's work highlighted was the importance of cultures of exchange, where alliances were formed to document the alternative realities, histories and new identity positions. These alliances that were formed with the flattening and crossing of racial, cultural, ethnic, diasporic, boundaries uncovered "alternative, non-identical histories that [challenged] and [disrupted] the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history" (Mohanty, 2003: 78–79). Fostered by the privacy and anonymity of technology, there has been an evolution of new behaviours and spaces from the contact and fusion of multiple influences. Movements like Warembo ni Yes, in their use of the digital imaginary revealed the divergent, unexpected, and creative use of mobile phones for activities that are imbued with iconic symbolism, revealing the powerful, useful, and meaningful possibilities. However, the rapid increase of mobile phone use has allowed for non-state actors to organise around feminist agendas.

Conclusion

In 2010, I had the great privilege of working with rural Kenyan women as I conducted an ethnographic research project. This knowledge-sharing process was a catalyst for this essay. The sophisticated ways of knowing and understanding the world, their rights and the challenges they experienced greatly shapes my understanding of feminist work. These conversations are so important in disrupting the staggering impacts of global patriarchy. The constant interruption of conversations and interviews by text messages and phone calls spurred my thinking and I began conceptualise the mobile phone outside the economic realm and going beyond the illustrations of the dialectic relationship between structure and agency (Chiumbu, 2012) towards the circulation of re-imagined epistemologies that speak to the realities in the lives of these women: not only revealing the continued and lasting effects of encounters with empire, but also unveiling the multiplicity of the effects of, and resistance to, patriarchy specifically in a context that is a multivocal articulation, that encompasses different narratives and parallel discourses often absent if we rely only on the logics of western feminism, globalisation, capitalism, and so-called democratic forces.

I opened this essay with a quote from Ama Ata Aidoo, who reveals the importance of feminism and the eradication of social injustice. Like Aidoo, Carole Boyce Davies asserts the need for both distinction and affinity, within feminisms, highlighting that African women and societies have concrete realities and that African feminism "questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favouring of sons," and at the same time "respects African woman's self-reliance and the penchant to cooperative work and social organisation... [it] understands the interconnectedness of race, class, and sex oppression" (Boyce Davies, 1986: 10). Following both Boyce Davies and Aidoo (1998), grounding in African feminism, I suggest a turn towards to both traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women and, the documenting and circulating of African women's realities and stories. The contemporary avenue that I foreground is the mobile phone, in its morphed state.

Endnotes

1. "Leapfrogging" is a term that was originally used in economic development but not often includes technology and theories of technology as a way to discuss the potential to bypass some "processes of accumulation of human capabilities and fixed investment in order to narrow the gaps in productivity and output that separate industrialized and developing countries" (Steinmueller, 2001: 194).

2. The Arab Spring is a time characterised by the revolutionary protests and demonstrations that began in 2010. These protests and demonstrations led to changes in political and presidential power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, as well as continued protests and uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Sudan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti and Western Sahara. Scholars like Herrera have described this so-called phenomenon as a generational rupture that has allowed the "wired students of this generation [who] had their own ideas about their place in the nation and had been experimenting with ways of exercising citizenship and agitating for a more democratic system" (Herrera, 2012).

3. One such venue is a recent Special Issue of the journal *African Identities*, which is titled, "The social lives of mobile telephony in Africa: Towards a research agenda."

4. M-Pesa ("M" for mobile and "*Pesa*" for money in Swahili) is a mobile phone banking system operated by Kenya's Vodafone affiliate Safaricom (Hughes and Lonie, 2007). Launched in 2007, this was not only the first of its kind in the nation or continent but also globally (Muwanguzi and Musambira, 2009). The application links users to electronic money accounts through a SIM card in their phone. This system, which is East Africa's largest mobile banking system, allows M-Pesa subscribers to deposit and withdraw cash from their accounts through a system that exchanges cash for electronic value at a network of retail stores (Eagle, 2009). This system also allows users to pay bills (in some cases hospital bills and school fees), and to purchase mobile airtime credit. Presently this application has the largest network for the exchange of money across the nation. It has also spurred other mobile phone competitors to start providing similar mobile phone banking services.

5. All that is required is a government-issued identification card, and no deposit.

6. The organisations were "FIDA Kenya, IED, the League of Kenya Women Voters and the Kenya Human Rights Commission" (Maingi, 2011).

7. I discuss Warembo ni Yes later on, however, as some background, its goals during the constitution review process were to "give a voice to women in Kenya who otherwise do not have a platform to express their views on issues such as constitutional review, good governance, public service delivery, corruption, human rights, development and freedom of information" (Malek, 2010).

8. FIDA Kenya's extensive participation, lobbying and civic education work surrounding the constitution is well documented in various venues including a case study titled: *The Kenyan Constitutional Reform Process: A Case Study on the work of FIDA Kenya in Securing Women's Rights.*

9. Following over a decade's work, Kenya's new constitution was signed into law in 2010. One of the major outcomes was legislation of women's rights to own and inherit land (Republic of Kenya, 2010). In addition to this affirmation of land rights, the constitution declares that women will fill at least one-third of elected and appointed government posts.

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