

# ***Cultural translation of mobile telephones: mediation of strained communication among Ethiopian married couples\****

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## ABSTRACT

Primarily aiming to highlight and exemplify how a technology can be socially and culturally appropriated, this article draws attention to the role of mobile phone communication in straining relations between married couples on the basis of material from Ethiopia. The findings show that mobile phone-mediated interactions between spouses are filled with monitoring and controlling activities, expressed in such forms as checking call logs, text messages, making casual calls, and switching-off phones, leading to highly strained relations that may result in the marital relation as a whole falling apart. These findings show how a technology can actively shape or influence interactions, and reveal interactions that might otherwise be concealed.

## INTRODUCTION

Mobile phone technology is affecting communication landscapes around the world in an unprecedented way. People are accessible

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anywhere and anytime, unless they encounter technical problems with their devices or make a deliberate effort to prevent it. One can easily reach people within one's circle of friends, close relatives, or acquaintances. This article explores how mobile communication is mediating or transforming interaction between married couples in Ethiopia. Much of the material was collected in interviews<sup>1</sup> conducted in Addis Ababa between June and November 2009, with forty married women and ten married men. The study also draws on my own observations and a few additional interviews at the beginning of 2011. With the exception of two women (who are housewives), all the interviewees are employees of government offices.

As discussed in much greater detail later, in Ethiopia mobile telephone communication actively influences the interaction between spouses in specific cultural ways. For example, both men and women use it to monitor the whereabouts of their respective partners. As some of my interviewees acknowledge, the technology has become a useful instrument to 'control' spouses, transforming relations between them. While some people use it to enhance cohesion and communication, other cases indicate that the technology can also lead to separation or divorce. In this respect, mobile phones have been culturally appropriated, in the sense that people use them in specific ways, which go with the social and cultural contexts that surround them. The principal objective of this paper is therefore to capture how mobile phones mediate tensions and conflicts within marriages, in addition to enhancing cordial and cohesive relations.

#### CONTEXT

Ethiopia was probably one of the first countries in Africa to import land-line telephones, only a decade and half after their invention. Behind this venture was Emperor Menelik, one of the pioneering architects of modern Ethiopia, who had an unequalled determination to import and use new technologies in the last decade of the nineteenth century. However, due to the rough topography of the country and poor economic and financial capability, the sector has expanded very slowly. Many telephone services in rural towns still operate using outdated systems. Until recently, regional centres that utilise microwave telephone lines were sparse. Digitising lines (to make the whole telecommunication complex of the country compatible with modern communication technologies around the world) is quite a recent endeavour, and much of this has been restricted to the capital and a few major cities of the country.

It is against this backdrop that mobile phone communication was introduced. According to newspaper records, Ethiopia joined the world of mobile telephony in April 1999. For example, *The Monitor* (27.4.1999), a weekly newspaper, heralded the good news along with ominous tones:

The Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC) launched its new mobile telephone service to its subscribers in the capital Addis Ababa on April 27... About 14,000 subscribers... had been registered by paying one third of the subscription fee... According to press reports clients were surprised by the change in the 29 Ethiopian cents per minute rate originally [announced by the Corporation]... The new rate of 75 cents per minute mobile call tariff was due to the declining exchange rate of the Birr against the US dollar and a relatively low number of registered subscribers according to the ETC External Relations manager...

By contrast, the then acting Director of ETC, Kebede Kiros (*World Investment News* 1999), proudly announced:

I am already using the mobile telephone. We are on the first stage, and preparing to commence at the end of this month. To give you a complete picture, we are starting with 36,000 subscribers found only in Addis Ababa, but the hardware and software capacity can be upgraded up to 100,000 subscribers. I am sure we will continue to expand our service to the main towns of this country, and be very successful in the mobile business. It will be a great gift to our customers for the year 1999.

These binary voices are still there, even after a considerable number of years have elapsed. Whereas the government boasts of the great achievement that it has made in meeting demand, the private press and some international agencies tell us the opposite. ETC cites figures as indicators of high growth rate. According to ETC's records, the number of subscribers rose from 1.2 million in June 2007 and 1.8 million in Dec. 2007 to a projection of 4 million for 2009 (ETC 2008: 36–7).

Whether these figures actually indicate the high rate of mobile distribution in the country is questionable, especially in terms of rates of growth in other African countries. The figure ETC (*ibid.*: 36) itself disclosed for June 2007 was a clear indicator that things have not been moving as fast as claimed: in terms of spatial distribution, only eight towns (outside the capital) were able to get mobile network coverage by June 2007. Ethiopia has a lot to do to catch up with other African countries. Five years after the introduction of mobile phones in Ethiopia, the sector was still undeveloped even by the standards of those described as 'most needy countries'. Mobile phone penetration per 100 inhabitants was noted as 0.004% for Ethiopia, while even countries such as Chad and Mali had 0.27% and 0.39 respectively (Scott

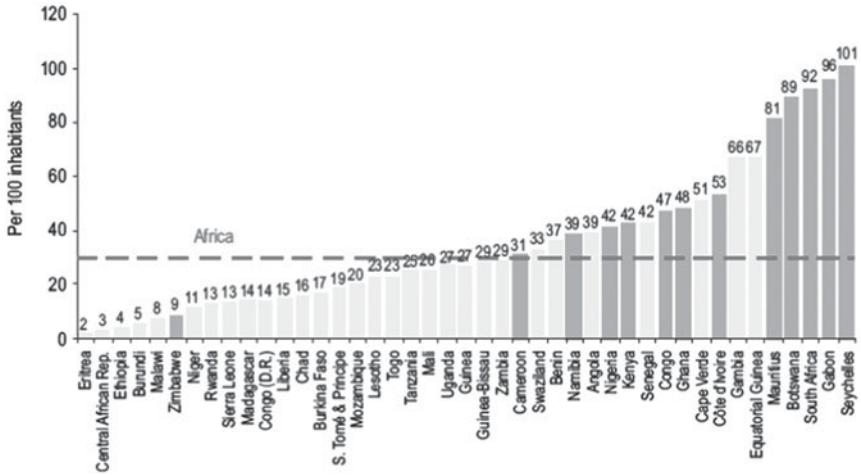


FIGURE 1

Mobile cellular penetration in Africa, 2008 *Source*: ITU 2009: 15, reprinted with permission.

*et al.* 2004). As Figure 1 shows, in 2008 Ethiopia was among the lowest three countries in Africa for mobile phone penetration. Another statistic recently released by the ITU (2010) notes that there were 6,517,212 Ethiopian subscribers in 2010, very low in relation to figures for other African countries. In that year, Kenya and Sudan had penetration rates of 61.63% and 40.54% respectively, while Ethiopia at 7.86% was close to war-ravaged Somalia (6.95%) and Eritrea (3.53%).

Mobile phones have nonetheless radically altered or started to alter the mode of interpersonal communication, and have reconfigured the style of conducting business in many sectors. Although the impact of mobile telephony on Africa may sometimes be overstated, particularly in commercially driven research reports, we still see a lot of substantive changes on the ground. Since Ethiopia's communication system has been underdeveloped, when mobile phones were introduced a few years ago, this provided a big jump in the country's communication experience. In a country where most people had no access to ordinary telephone lines, the mobile phone was to them rather other-worldly.

#### MOBILE PHONE STUDIES: AN OVERVIEW

Numerous research reports, books and articles have appeared since the second half of the 1990s, by which time it was already more than

a decade since the technology had spread in highly industrialised countries. Haddon (1998) was one of the first works to examine some of the social impacts of mobile phones. Richard Ling (2004), one of the principal authorities who have produced numerous works since the second half of the 1990s (in the 1990s, most of his pieces were in the form of reports, see bibliography in Ling 2004), explored the social impact of this new technology. Taking Norway as his point of departure for empirical data and wide-spectrum surveys conducted in Scandinavia and other West European countries, he has canvassed the various uses this new technology was facilitating. Many of the issues dealt with by Ling are of course specific to the experience of users in the region. There are also country or sub-culture specific works that deal with the social impact of mobile communication. Ito *et al.* (2005) address impacts of mobile devices in Japan. In studies that focus on highly industrialised regions of the world, youth and teenage sub-cultures have been targeted for analysis (see Castells *et al.* 2007; Goggin 2006; Ito *et al.* 2005; Kato 2005; Ling 2004; Miyaki 2005; Okada 2005).

Much of this literature does not consider the use of mobile phone communication in less developing areas of the world, and much of its focus is on impacts. Recently, however, the number of works dealing with least developed regions has increased. For example, James E. Katz' two edited volumes (2003, 2008) address issues of cross-cultural and cross-cutting nature. As the title *Machines that Become us* (Katz 2003) implies, much of this book concerns the domestication of mobile phones in different social contexts.

The second book (Katz 2008) is more of a reader, with over thirty chapters. This work includes chapters that not only analyse both country-specific and cross-cultural experiences, but also increase the theoretical sophistication of the study of mobile phones. Ling's (2008a) essay, drawing on and critically engaging perspectives of leading sociologists such as Durkheim, Goffman and Collins, discusses mediated ritual interaction. Other essays incorporated in Katz's (2008) anthology examine the potential of mobile phone communication for social mobilisation. In showing the role of mobile phones in the socio-political life of the Middle East, some studies (see Ibahrine 2008; Mesch & Talmud 2008) indicate their instrumentality in political mobilisation. By contrast, Molony (2008) focuses on the 'nondevelopmental uses' of mobile phones in Africa, casting doubt on the widespread view that these help poor people in developing countries to access resources – a useful point of view that cautions us against careless extrapolations. Before Molony, Alzouma (2005) brought a similar but much broader analysis of this

tendency related to ICT in Africa, tracing the inclination to connect new technologies to development back to much earlier periods. He notes: 'it is not the first time that grandiose hopes of leapfrogging development have been attached to a new technology. Since the end of colonialism, nearly every decade has been marked by the celebration of a new technology as a means for overcoming the long-lasting problems faced by developing countries' (*ibid.*: 340)

Horst and Miller's (2006) ethnographic account of mobile phone technology in Jamaica focuses on the life of low-income Jamaicans and the role of the cell phone in helping them cope with poverty. Like Molony and Alzouma, however, they question the widely held view that mobile phones could do wonders in the fight against poverty and other social ills. Similarly, this paper seeks to highlight how mobile phones could go beyond maintaining cohesive ties (emphasised by the existing literature on mobile phones), and constrain relations between spouses.

#### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: FAMILY COHESION AND COMMUNICATION

In Ethiopia, and probably in most other developing countries, interpersonal relations are primarily social capital. Relations between family members (including extended relations), friendship circles, members of ethnic and religious communities and so forth are mobilised for different purposes. People forge connections or try to reinforce (or at times break or disrupt) already existing connections for a variety of reasons. Although these were prevailing phenomena before the introduction of mobile or traditional telephone lines, mobile telephony has enabled, as Ling (2008b) stressed, a 'mediated' interaction, and – we may add – created new possibilities within existing social ties. The issue at hand here is then, how does mobile communication organise or upset these social ties in a new way?

Drawing on works of Emile Durkheim, Erving Goffman and Randall Collins, Ling (2008b) analyses what he calls mediated social interaction. The sociologists just mentioned did not talk of mediated social interaction, placing ritual interaction in co-present situations at centre stage. Ling's *New Tech, New Ties* takes us to a different level, by examining *mediated* ritual interaction. He writes:

In the Durkheimian system there was the question of how to perpetuate the sense of group solidarity across time between ritual events. Goffman felt that ritual interaction was so enmeshed into everyday life that there is quite literally no mention of totems in the work of Goffman... Mobile

communication further extends the possibilities for interaction beyond the co-present. Thus, while co-present interaction is that realm where solidarity is quite often founded, the glow of the event and the glow of solidarity within the group can be, and indeed is in many cases kept alive via mobile communication. In this way, mobile communication obviates totems.

(Ling 2008b: 51)

Mediated communication is ritualised to a degree similar to face-to-face interactions. And the degree of communication between members of close-knit groups has increased all the more with the introduction of mobile phones. In contrast to the pre-mobile phone mode of mediated interaction, where we could only call to places (fixed lines), mobile phone communication has enabled us to be constantly in touch with our family members, friends and colleagues. Ling relates:

The mobile phone is an enabling technology for connected presence. Whenever we feel the need or the desire to interact with our intimates, we can act on the urge then and there. We do not need to collect the themes we can imagine talking about with others and saving them until our next meeting... The interaction can take place at the drop of a hat. We can call or we can send a message spontaneously.

(*ibid.*: 172)

Adopting the term ‘connected presence’ coined by Licoppe (2004), which indicates the intensity of interaction that people may enter into due to mobile phones, Ling (2008b) also shows how mobile phones can enable us to easily reach our intimate contacts. In Ethiopia too, even though many people cannot afford to call their contacts on a frequent basis, people in some major urban centres use their mobile phones to mediate their relationships. Due to the perpetual contact that mobile phones potentially offer, the interaction or communication between spouses is transformed in some ways. As already noted, mobile phones actively shape these relations.

#### BEYOND FAMILY COHESION

As is doubtless the case in most developing countries, most married couples in Ethiopia (including those who want to form a family) live by ‘traditional’ conjugal expectations and roles that make women emotionally and economically dependent on their husbands. Even when working outside the home as nurses, teachers, saleswomen or secretaries, women (including those who think that they have a more liberal family life) are expected to come home immediately after work and attend to household chores, children and other familial concerns



(Biseswar 2008; see Poluha 2004: 138–9, for an in-depth study of the cultural schema behind the gendered use of spaces in Ethiopia).

As Rhoden (2003: 248) points out, married women construct their identity around their ‘marital and family relationships’ and invoke less ‘the occupational aspect of their identity’. Compared with married women, married men may develop a greater attachment to the office where they work. Besides, men have friendship circles which they dearly want to join after work. Meeting in bars after work and talking about current affairs, politics or family affairs while enjoying beer is the daily routine of many married and working men in most urban centres in Ethiopia.

The question is, how does mobile communication affect cohesion and communication between spouses in such a context? Ling (2006, 2008a) and other scholars (e.g. Ishii 2006) have tried to substantiate the place of mobile telephones in enhancing cohesion in family life. Despite the expectation that it should be as cohesive a unit as possible, family life is obviously a field of conflict of diverse interests and power relations. As Ling (2006: 82) points out, cohesion is, after all, the outcome of a ‘balance between discord and order’. The discord aspect seems to be underplayed in the literature, however.<sup>2</sup> This study, drawing on cases from Ethiopia, attempts to emphasise this face of communication between family members, especially between spouses and partners.

### *Findings*

To start, let us begin with a dramatic expression of mediated interaction from the men’s side, as performed in bars and pubs in the evening. It has become regular nowadays to see men running out of bars with ringing phones on their palms as if they are running with time bombs. An outsider who came from a land where answering a ringing phone in some public places is considered as something improper might believe that such dramatic actions are taken out of respect to friends and other customers in the bar. Of course, some people do this out of decorum. However, responding to calls even amidst meetings and in offices would not be considered as improper. Most people in Ethiopia are at liberty to answer their phones in taxis, buses, restaurants (while having lunch with friends) or bars. One might see the same person who has run out of the noise and clamour of the bar with a ringing or blinking mobile telephone making or receiving calls amidst the noise without much constraint.



In answering open-ended questions, most respondents have clearly noted the changes that this mediated interaction has brought about in their interaction with their respective spouses, fiancés, or other members of their family. Respondents (including those with whom I discussed the issue informally) recognise that mobile communication has helped them to easily reach their partners and talk to them whenever they want to, regardless of where they are. Mobile telephony is therefore instrumental in reinforcing family relations and cementing cohesion. A case in point is:

*Respondent 1*

Sex: F; Age: not specified ; Years in Marriage: 5; children: 1; Years with mobile phone: 3

I usually call once or twice a day. But it all depends on conditions I am in . . . . When I call my husband and his phone is switched off, I would assume that he could be in a meeting or in a situation where he cannot answer my call. Both of us are not worried in this regard. We have never quarrelled on account of this. But I never switch off my phone. I always respond to his calls. Both of us, of course, check each other's phone for calls we made and received. But we have never quarrelled . . . . The use of this technology is immense. Before we start using this phone, I had to wait until my husband comes back home to discuss matters that are urgent. Now, it would only take a few minutes to embark on an issue and discuss it. People are using it for business purposes. Traders exchange information regarding the price of goods.

This is, however, the most obvious and superficial aspect of the interaction. The words of some forty-five out of fifty respondents, as well as the observed behaviour of people in action, indicate that mobile telephony has also drastically transformed family life and relations between spouses. Even among responses that stress the cohesive aspect – about twenty respondents recognised this – there is something in between the lines. The interviewee quoted above, for example, suggests that checking each other's handset seems something routine and natural to do. The remark of the woman that she has never quarrelled with her husband does not necessarily show that their communication has no problems. In fact, the communication pattern that each follows (such as cross checking one another's handsets) is itself suggestive of danger. It might only take a single anomalous text message to start a quarrel.

In this respect, one prominent feature that increasingly comes to the surface because of this mediated interaction is monitoring and

controlling. In a context where women are supposed to be submissive and live up to their husbands' expectations (for example, by staying at home), most women seem to use mobile telephones to manage or control their husbands from a distance, or by inspecting their daily calls and text messages when their husbands are around.

For some couples, this is a daily routine. Of the fifty interviewees, only six said that they did not check their spouses' handsets; about ten of them confessed to doing so almost on a daily basis, while the remainder did so occasionally. Thus, inspecting spouses' handsets has become almost a culture. Nonetheless, spouses or partners not only check one another's phones. They also interrogate each other to the point where they get stuck due to a 'novel' discovery that one had got some hidden contact outside the other's knowledge – sometimes real and other times imagined, resulting in communication failure.

It also has benefits, however. Especially for wives who are supposed to stay at home or come back home 'on time', the mobile telephone helps them not only to reach their husbands but also to control them at a distance. Hence, men risk much when they switch off their phones or do not respond to calls right away. That was why I represented the ringing or blinking phones of men 'running out of bars' as a 'time bomb'. This representation is, however, more than figurative. The phone is in real terms a time bomb because answering amid the clamour of a bar might have serious consequences equivalent to not answering. If one takes the latter option, however, the person risks so much, especially if it is in the evening and outside office hours. So, one way or the other, one would be playing with fire.

### *Respondent 16*

Sex: F; Age: 20–9; Years in marriage: 4; Children: 1; Years with mobile phone: 4.

I usually call and receive calls twice a day from my husband. In moments when his phone is switched off, I would almost lose myself out of rage. We once quarrelled seriously and were not on speaking terms for almost a month. This happened because when I called him several times, I couldn't get a response for some time until, at the end, the telephone was picked by a woman. I went mad... Now we are fine. If he is not responding to my call (while the telephone is calling), I would still go mad, though... I always check his phone when he comes back home. I do this almost on daily basis. I would check the calls he made and those he received, including text messages. I then ask him the details and he tries to respond. At times, we reach a point where we couldn't communicate properly and we end up

fighting verbally. But, on the contrary, he has never checked my phone. This is a headache for me. I am a little bit concerned – I suspect that he may not love me anymore.

Watching or, as some women would say, ‘controlling’ is one of the apparently new developments that this mediated interaction has brought about, or – shall we say – something it has disclosed. It has lent people means to monitor what is going on at the other end. That is why people check handsets of their partners for call records and text messages, though some seem to do it naturally. As Respondent 16, a housewife, indicates, a whole new mode of communication seems to have developed among couples. Inspecting mobile telephones for records of calls and messages and then interrogating one another on ‘data’ found thereon seems to be a daily routine among some married couples.

This does not mean that every couple does this. A few of the interviewees (four men and one woman among the fifty interviewees) noted very clearly that it would be unbecoming of them to do this. The following account reveals this. Nonetheless, as we shall see shortly, failing to respond to calls is regarded as a serious offence.

### *Respondent 2*

Sex: M; Age: 30–9; Years in Marriage: 4; Children: 2; Years with mobile phone: 4.

On average, I usually call and receive calls twice or three times a day. I call my wife, usually only once a day and this is mostly to remind her to bring our children from school and make sure that they study and do their homework . . . If my wife’s phone is switched off when I call her, I will call to the land-line and ask what happened. We have quarrelled because of such incidents. You know, she sometimes puts her apparatus on silent mode and does the household chores. If she is not responding to my calls, I will ask her when I am home why she failed to answer them. On her part too, she would demand an explanation why mine was switched off or why I did not answer her calls. We had therefore clashed at some occasions . . . I know also similar incidents among other families. One of my friends had a hard time with his wife because he had switched off his phone the whole day. In fact, she threw her apparatus at him out of rage . . . I have heard that some couples check each other’s phone for various reasons. *But when it comes to me and my wife we never checked one another’s phone.*

As pointed out by this respondent, a good number of couples may consider cross-checking records of mobile phones as improper. However, even people who seem not to care much on this account harbour disappointment and frustration when their sweethearts do not pick up

their phones. That is why, as some of our respondents reveal, one of their daily routines when couples meet after office hours is to discuss and settle accounts, or to confront each other and end up skirmishing.

One may cast doubt as to the representativeness of cases such as Respondent 16, since the relationship, after all, looks so precarious in some ways. However, despite differences in the degree of cohesion in different families, the tension is almost universal. A case in point is the story of Respondent 3, who strongly speaks of love and care. And yet what the respondent cherishes most in mobile communication is control, even with the constant anxiety that she suffers from because of her husband's failure to answer her calls.

### *Respondent 3*

Sex: F; Age: 20–9; Years in marriage: 4; Children: 1; Years with mobile phone: 4

I usually call, on average, ten to fifteen times. My husband calls me every time...when he misses me. When I call and my husband's phone is switched off, I would go mad...I too would immediately switch off my phone, in response. In case of not responding while the phone is not off? This is impossible! I will go crazy. On my part, I don't switch off my phone. My husband is therefore positive about it. But I have clashed with my husband several times [apparently because his phone was switched off or he was not responding to her calls]. I even complained bitterly once saying 'I wish there was no such a thing as mobile [telephone]...' I check text messages in my husband's mobile phone apparatus. I sometimes see repeated messages from one or more numbers. But, I am not that worried about these messages. I would go crazy if I find that my husband has been texting or calling other women. In such a case, I will ask for a divorce. I live with him because I trust and depend on him. When I hear the voice of a woman through his phone [when he gets a call from another woman], I feel pain and ail so much. Before we had this phone, we had to fix a place and time to meet with my husband. In the past, even if I couldn't meet him as I wish, I wouldn't mind too much. I would say 'maybe he is busy'. Ever since we begun using mobile phone, however, things have changed a lot. Mobile is especially good for controlling... Since I am a housewife and spend much of my time at home, I am now equipped to control him; I can call him whenever I want to. Mobile phone has both good and bad sides. But, above all, for me, it is so useful. It has enabled me to call my husband anytime. Mobile is particularly a good and effective remedy to control my husband.

Confrontations feature in mobile communication between married couples and partners because they apparently need to monitor each other. Some respondents clearly feel that owning a mobile phone has 'equipped' them to control or handle their relations with their partners.

As a result, lots of people seem to be uncomfortable when a spouse's mobile phone is switched off. A newly married man, about thirty-five, noted something similar to the case just discussed. He said: 'I usually have three calls on average on daily basis . . . I use different alternatives when my wife's phone is switched off or when she is not responding to my calls. I get angry in such cases. She too gets angry when she couldn't reach me for various reasons. She usually switch off her phone by way of retaliating.'

Some respondents discriminate between conditions. They note that there are some moments when they need to be considerate even if they cannot reach their spouses. Nonetheless, as the following case clearly demonstrates, even such relatively tolerant relations seem to be rife with friction.

*Respondent 17*

Sex: F; Age: 30–9; Years in Marriage: 10; Children: not stated; Years with mobile phone: 10

I call my husband and receive calls from him only occasionally. He sometimes switch off his phone but since he does this only when in a meeting, I don't hold any grudges. As to me, I don't switch-off my phone but at times I might not hear when it is ringing since I at times leave it in my handbag. In such a case, my husband would ask me why I was not picking my phone. That is it. However, when he is not responding to my calls outside office hours, I would be very much angry. I would then demand an explanation when he comes back home . . . Otherwise, I believe that mobile telephone is so useful if we use it for matters very important such as following up what is happening at the other end, exchanging greetings, etc.

Even those who insist that there is no any problem in their marriage on account of the mediation of their relation by mobile phones hint that the potential is always there for conflicts to arise. A man in his late forties and with eighteen years of married life related:

I don't have any problem with my wife with respect to our use of the mobile phone. We may call each other once or twice a day but there has never been any incident of quarrel. There has never been a conflict even when I am not responding to her calls. I would explain later on that I was in class, teaching. But I have heard a lot of stories about other people. When there is no trust between spouses, there would be usually a lot of lying. Some lie about where they are and some switch off their phones.

The question that one might pose here is: what if such reasons are perceived as mere pretexts? This means the potential for conflict is still there. But more importantly this case reflects that failure to respond to a

call or switching off a phone is still a pertinent issue to be discussed between spouses. In this respect, even those people who brag that their relation with their spouses has never been compromised by the presence of mobile phones could not easily shrug off possible consequences.

However, a very important indicator to be noted in passing is the number of years couples have stayed in married life. Although the small number of cases does not enable us to generalise about the relationship between mobile phone-mediated interaction and the number of years of marriage, it seems that the longer the period of married life, the fewer factors there would be to arouse suspicions between couples. The case just discussed (a man with eighteen years of married life) appears to confirm this to some degree. The story of a 55-year-old man with a thirty-year married life reflects this very clearly:

I usually call my wife outside office hours. There is no problem in my family with respect to our mobile phone communication. I turn my mobile phone on silent mode or switch it off when I am in a meeting. Otherwise I am always available for my wife and family. [When asked about other people using the technology, he said:] I have heard about a lot of stories. A lot of people use mobile phones for lying. That is very bad. This kind of behaviour doesn't have any benefits other than breeding mistrust... I and my wife never checked each other's phones. How can this be! It is impossible! When her phone calls and she is not around, I take it to her so that she can answer it. She does the same thing. What matters between us is that we trust each other. We really don't care about who is calling. Thus, the introduction of mobile phone communication didn't create something new to our relationship. We live in the same way – both before and after mobile phone. But then, I know that owning a mobile phone does have both positive and negative aspects. For those who are used to lying, it has got a negative side. But it is the mobile itself which is a liar, not people. For those who use it for their respective businesses, it is an amazing instrument. It reduces distance. One can easily reach people. When it comes to people like us, it is like moving around with an empty box. We don't use it as it should be.

The man presented his story in a way that seems to substantiate my conjecture that mobile communication might have little power to affect an already well-established or matured relationship. But he also notes that users like him are not actually using the technology 'as it should be'. His account of how others use the technology very well shows how it can be employed to its full potential.

Let us now return to much younger couples. In line with a few of the cases discussed earlier, a man in his early twenties (Respondent 21) thought that the technology has been instrumental in breeding 'mistrust' in his marriage. The young man was married for about three years at the time of his response, and stressed that mobile

communication is at the heart of his misery as far as his marriage is concerned. He related:

I am a kind of guy who uses mobile telephone frequently. When it comes to my marriage, I could say that the telephone has created a lot of mistrust. In moments when my wife does not pick her phone, I would be pained and start suspecting that something might be going on there . . . On her part, she is not that concerned. I know also a couple in my neighbourhood who nag each other because of this phone . . .

With one exception,<sup>3</sup> all the cases discussed so far and those to follow shortly clearly show how tense relations can be between spouses. People need a lot of explaining following a failure to respond to calls. Nor is a demand for explanation limited to married couples or partners. Pressure for explanations also comes from close relatives, friends, office-mates, and other intimate relations. However, such tense situations recur frequently among married couples and partners. As we will see, the consequences may at times be dire, mostly preceded by apparently petty but ultimately consequential quarrel build-ups such as demands for explanation, occasional tantrums, or checking handsets for calls and text messages that might eventually lead to family break-up.

Checking one's spouse's or partner's handset for records of calls and text messages is a persistent experience that respondents readily relate. Indeed, for some of them this looks like something that ought to be there in a relationship. Respondent 18 noted: 'my husband once checked text messages in my phone and he saw several messages from a man, who was my office-mate. He then asked me the reason why I am getting these specific messages . . . I then had to warn my office-mate not to do this again.' As just noted, checking one another's handsets for call records and text messages has come to be taken as something acceptable. Respondent 22, a man in his early thirties, stated:

I call my wife when I want to. There were cases when her phone would be switched-off. This could be due to the problem of network coverage. At times she might not pick up her phone due to work in her office. I don't worry much as long as I get a call back. I am concerned when I am not getting any call back. We have quarrelled because of such incidents. She also would react similarly if I failed to call her. I would sometimes promise that I would call her at a specific time but if I failed to do so, this would be reason enough for a fight . . . I check her phone from time to time. Mostly I see that most calls she received or she made are with me. The same holds true for text messages. She likes my messages. Mobile telephone has many uses of course. I came to know my wife due to mobile communication. I got her number from her friends and started to call her. That was how we came to know each other. Now, she is mine.



Inspecting the handset of one's spouse is presented here as something routine that should be done. The real purpose behind seems to be surveillance even though it is sometimes presented as a sign of intimacy and love. Respondent # 3 (quoted above fully) noted: 'I check text messages in my husband's mobile phone apparatus'. A good number of my respondents (more than half of the fifty interviewees) answered similarly – most without any sign of regret for doing so. Let us see part of what Respondent 16 (fully quoted above) related with respect to checking handsets once again:

I always check his phone when he comes back home. I do this almost on daily basis. I check the calls he made and those he received, including text messages. I then ask him the details one by one and he responds. At times, we reach a point where we couldn't communicate properly and we end up fighting verbally. But, on the contrary, he has never checked my phone. This is a headache for me. I am a little bit concerned – I suspect that he may not love me anymore.

The fact that the man doesn't have the habit of checking his wife's telephone is interpreted here as a failure to assume the role of a loving husband. Not checking is readily taken as a sign of indifference. In this respect, looking into one another's handsets is part and parcel of the ritual in this mediated interaction. In the past (and possibly still to some degree), there was a convention that if a husband was not envious, it could mean that he no longer loved his wife. A failure to demonstrate feelings of jealousy might indicate a lack of interest in her. In this respect, our respondent's suspicion that her husband might no longer love her is reminiscent of this tradition, or a cultural translation of the new technology in terms of traditional affective ties.

However, checking one another's mobile phones may be something more than cultural translation. People may have pragmatic ends such as spying on a partner or spouse who had already displayed suspect behaviour. Such a practice may also be a way of protecting and maintaining one's family. The following case is highly illuminating in many ways:

### *Respondent 19*

Sex: F; age: 20–9; years in marriage: 2; no. children: not stated; years with mobile phone: 1

I and my husband call each other occasionally. I actually call him more than he calls me. When he is not picking his phone, I get angry. I even assume that he might be with another woman . . . . I ask him what happened when he is not responding to my calls, and his usual pretext is that his phone has

discharged. But I am worried as he had changed his line recently. I asked him why he should go to the extent of changing his line. His response was annoying. He simply and readily said he would like to avoid calls from someone I don't know... I didn't like this apparently mischievous idea but I had no choice but to accept it. We have quarrelled so many times because of this... Besides, my husband gets many text messages though I don't know their contents since they are usually written in English. I ask him to translate some of the messages for me but he either switches to a different topic, or rudely ignores my demand. The other troublesome thing I encounter is that some of the names on his phone are written in abbreviated forms. I once copied these numbers and called from another phone and I have been able to discover that most belong to women.

As we can gather from these words, the relation between the couple seems to be already marred with mistrust. Although they have been married for only two years, much seems to be going on behind the curtain. The woman is full of suspicion. She thought her husband might be unfaithful. The manner in which the man keeps names of some of his contacts has forced his wife to go the extra mile – making calls to some of the numbers and claiming that these numbers belonged to women. Thus, as already pointed out above, overseeing a partner's behaviour may have pragmatic ends. It may either help the family maintain its cohesiveness, or lead to its dissolution before something consequential and irreversible happens.

Other untold stories may be instrumental in exacerbating relations, or the marriage might already have been shaky before the couple had mobile phones. However, as the woman noted at the end of her response, quarrels and clashes developed following their use of mobile phones. She related:

The time we lived together – both in marriage and when we were friends – before we started to use mobile phone was very wonderful. It was sweet. Ever since we had owned mobile [phone], however, things changed. We mostly quarrel... Mobile phone has both positive and negative aspects. For me, it has become a trouble. It has become a challenge to my marriage.

Inspection of text messages and calls of the handset of one's spouse or partner may therefore have a practical end such as surveillance and control, which may in turn help to maintain cohesion (or for that matter to fuel quarrels that end with family break-up). But, as we can see in the case of the woman who interpreted her husband's 'lack of interest' to check her handset as an expression of indifference, the manner in which the control or surveillance occurs seems to have a cultural expression. For showing interest in daily calls and texting one's wife might be interpreted as indicating that the man really cares.

The other important aspect of mobile telephones in the context of traditional matrimonial relations is the way it affects power relations. As we can infer from the cases we have been discussing so far, the introduction of mobile phones has enabled women to remotely control the whereabouts of their husbands outside office hours. To some degree, this new possibility has empowered women, opening up space or freedom for them. For example, they can easily communicate with relatives and friends, and confide some of their worries and anxieties to them. A study that explores the impact of mobile phones on the status of women (Lee 2009) claims that mobile phones have decreased women's tolerance for domestic violence in India.

However, as Amartya Sen and his colleagues (Harvard 2009) recently noted, mobile telephony may go against freedom as much as it is used to enhance it. To substantiate the complexity of the issue, Sen expresses his scepticism by saying that mobile phones may at times have negative impacts on human freedom. They may be instrumental in encroaching on privacy, or exacerbating domestic violence. Sen reminds the conveners that 'one of the downsides of the expansion of freedom' is the reduction of 'the freedom of others'. Of course, a good number of women in Ethiopia – I am again talking about users who live in a few towns – have been able to use the service. In this respect, since mobile phones are first phones for many people, its introduction has created new possibilities for women. But, as Sen rightly pointed out, mobile phones may be used to impose restrictions on women who are forced to live by traditional family norms and mores. Men may present mobile phones for their female partners as gifts, the ulterior motive being close monitoring and supervision, which means restriction of freedom.

Let's see the extent to which such pressures may go to on the basis of an interesting vignette. This is the story of a woman, who is in her mid-thirties and married for the last ten years, with three children. She runs a small restaurant in Bishoftu, about 40 km south of the capital city Addis Ababa.

A few months ago, one of the customers of the restaurant, a taxi driver, asked me to make a special arrangement for him so that he could have meal for lunch out of lunch time. This was due to the fact that he would come late after all the meals are finished. Thus, he asked me if he could call me on my phone whenever he wanted to reserve a meal. I then agreed that I would take up his calls and pass it to the cook. I also informed my husband about it and got his concession. The guy in question started to call me and I usually informed the cook to prepare one meal for him. One day this guy called me

at an unusual time, around 6:00 pm. When I asked why he called me, he said he would like to get information concerning something unrelated to my business... I was a little bit angry but then I gave him the specific information he wanted out of politeness. My husband was then very much angry. He asked me furiously why he should call me at this time... I tried to explain but it was all in vain. After a few days, my husband told me very early in the morning that my phone was ringing at 10:00 pm the other day. I told him that I didn't hear it. Then I checked my phone while I was going to my workplace. I saw that the call was from my customer. I was very much irritated. Then I got a call around 10:00 in the morning from the same number. I took this opportunity to stop this guy from calling me again since I was having a hard time back in my house. He said (on the phone) that he would like to meet me... I shouted on him that he should never call me again and then hanged the phone... But then I felt that I didn't warn him enough and wanted to call him and warn him further. It was at this time that I realised that the two calls were in fact made from my husband, insinuating like the taxi driver. When I opened my phone to call back, I saw the number that it rather belonged to my husband... I then realised that my husband had trampled with my phone, changing the contact name of his own telephone number as if it belonged to my customer... I was very, very disappointed at what was going on... My husband called me once again disguised as the other guy, apparently changing his voice by compressing his nose... I answered the phone as if I didn't know, telling him that I was busy... and hanged the phone. He then called me using a land-line; at this moment, with his own real voice. He called me to tell me that all the three calls were from him and that he was happy to learn that I was trustworthy...

(interview, 3·1·2011)

The account demonstrates how relations may be mistrustful, leading spouses to use mobile phone facilities for a damaging cat-and-mouse game. Men (from a feeling of superiority and customarily accepted norms that women should be bossed around by their male partners) try to control their wives' communication to the extent of overseeing whom they should or shouldn't communicate with. The following is an outstanding case of a woman who was compelled to ask for a divorce after two years of marriage, due to a series of clashes with her husband on account of his impositions on how she should use her mobile telephone. She stated:

I never switch off my phone. But then, I had always been fighting with my husband because I usually get calls from my friends. He never wanted me to have calls from other people. He used to insist that I should never have calls from anyone once I am back home. Due to this, we were separated... He used to check my phone almost on daily basis. Because of this we were always clashing. I know that mobile telephone is very vital. But for me it was a cause of agony. I lost my marriage eventually because of it. When I was in

marriage I was forced to change my number three times to avoid trouble with my husband. Even if the caller is a woman, he would usually want to pick it up and talk to the person.

Following this response from a short interview, the woman was willing to give me a more detailed account of what happened then. She said:

From the very beginning, immediately after I and my husband were married, I wanted to have a mobile phone like everyone around me. He then expressed his disagreement openly, saying that I should use the telephone of my workplace instead. Despite his repeated warning that I shouldn't have mobile telephone, however, I bought the service because most of my friends own one. I contended that whether it is useful or not, I must have it because I don't want to look inferior to my friends. Failing to have one like them would give my friends a wrong message: they would think that I couldn't have a mobile because I couldn't afford the money. My husband once called me repeatedly but as it was on silent mode, I didn't realise that he had called. He later on rebuked me, 'Where did you go when I was calling you for such a long time?' I then stopped to use the silent mode and put it instead on vibration. This didn't help much. When I was busy doing office work and moved a few metres away from my desk, I wouldn't hear it. My husband would then become mad at me when I am back home, or when I talked to him on the phone to explain what happened. Following such clashes I started to use a mild ringing tone sufficient enough for me to hear it. My family and friends would call me when I am at home. He would explode sometimes: 'Where should I go from my home? Your friends can meet you tomorrow and talk to you then. Why do they need to call you at this time? Didn't you tell them that you are married?' He would call me names and what have you . . . Due to this, I had to warn my family members to call the land-line when they want to contact me. But I couldn't say the same thing to my friends. I was too embarrassed to say that . . . Once, a friend called me using her husband's phone because her own phone had discharged power. I had the number of her husband, too, though we don't call each other. I had it in case of emergency. Then, when my husband came home late in the evening, he checked my phone and he discovered that there was a call from a man's phone. He was so mad that I had to leave the house for a few days. Close family members intervened and the dust settled for the time being. But then, he set a condition I couldn't accept. He demanded that no one should call me once I am back home from office. I couldn't buy this idea any more. Things got worse and worse till the time I had no choice than asking for a divorce.

The issue whether our informant needed a mobile phone was resolved in an interesting way. The crucial matter was not so much the instrumentality of the phone to communicate with others, as its symbolic significance. She had to buy the service initially because most of her friends had one. Having or not having a mobile phone was a question of pride for her. Once she acquired the service, however, the

need to communicate arose naturally. That was when more and more troubles ensued, including restrictions that seem apparently petty but fateful in terms of the eventual outcome of the conflict, i.e. end of the marriage, which incurred heavy costs psychologically, socially and economically.



So much is therefore going on between spouses due to the facilities and capabilities that mobile phones lend. They spy on each other, check call logs and text messages, putting so much pressure on each other. It is very difficult to generalise from the discussion thus far that the pressure is more on women than men, as there are significant number of men who are subject to incessant investigations and nags by their wives. But why should women subject their husbands to such close investigation? Why do they need to spy on their husbands? One of the reasons for this, though apparently superficial, is the varied nature of the space that they occupy and the rights they hold (Poluha 2004). Whereas men are free to stay out, most women are restricted to the home environment and, if they are working, to their offices.

In this respect, the introduction of mobile telephones has enabled women to update themselves on the whereabouts of their husbands and at times to urge them to come back home in time or to monitor their situation from a distance. That is why some women are busy inspecting text messages and calls made and received. Some make unexpected or casual calls, followed by usual questions such as ‘Where are you now?’, or ‘What are you doing?’ Such monitoring and controlling may especially benefit women because it might unlock an otherwise murky situation before something irreversible happens.

Nonetheless, the mere presence of new ‘enabling’ technologies does not by itself bestow freedom. After all, technologies function within social, cultural and economic contexts. In a society where women have little or no choice, the more such enabling communication devices come to the household, the less communicative the relation between spouses would become. Cases discussed so far reveal that the small tincture of freedom that women have could be further compromised or trampled.

Is it only women who get their freedom restricted? What about men’s? Due to the wider horizon of space and time that men enjoy, we have seen many women acknowledging that they use mobile phones to check on their husbands. Informal interviews with married men reveal that

many of them also complain that their wives pressure them by recurrent calls, and monitoring their conversations with other people. But then men perceive such checks and calls as expressions of ‘controlling’ from their loved ones, or at worst as ‘pestering’, not as trampling on their rights as men. After all the possibility of encroachment on the rights of men by women is almost absent as a cultural code.

The use of this communication technology is shaped by the precepts that the cultural framework produces. In this respect, while exploring the way in which mobile phones can shape communication among married couples in Ethiopia (or similarly situated countries in Africa and elsewhere), it is important to note the cultural ambience of gender relations within which this technology functions. In other words, inquiring into how mobile communication shapes human relations between close family members should necessarily be accompanied by a close understanding of the gender power matrix in place. Biseswar (2008), in her theoretically superb study of educated women in Ethiopia, emphatically and vigorously points out that in male-dominated cultures, the little freedom that women enjoy is not freedom at all, since society easily revokes it when it wants to. As she says:

Women’s level of freedom is relative to that of men, the community, society and the state at large, each having their own restrictive mechanisms. This means that their freedom is not an autonomous entity which exists independently of that enjoyed by others. They always tend to have less or no freedom at all. To a large extent, cultural and religious practices also tend to curb or deprive women of their freedom. In most African societies, women are seen to exist not for themselves, but for the collective, sacrificing their own wellbeing for that of the community as a whole and the family in particular.

(*ibid.*: 113)

One can imagine what ‘connected presence’ might mean in such a context. It may mean turning a household into a battlefield. The small freedom that women may have in oppressive social and cultural environments can easily be nullified, paradoxically enough, due to the creation of new possibilities for increased communication in the domestic environment.

The last two vignettes in the previous section substantiate this point very well. The story of the woman whose communications in running her business led her husband to wage both hidden and open war against her substantiates the degree to which this mediated interaction may go. The woman who was forced to end her marriage is another prominent example supporting how this mediated interaction sustains discord,



indicating the degree to which traditional prescriptive behaviour could go. According to this cultural prescription, men should be in control. Men not only head the household but also closely monitor the communication pattern of their wives. Matters such as with whom, when, or how one's wife ought to manage her mobile phone communication are to be determined by the man. For that matter, there is a tendency (though probably not that widespread) that the man must decide not only whom the wife should communicate with, but also whether she needs the technology at all.

From the discussion so far, we can see how communication between spouses who use mobile phones is being affected at different levels. This communication device can provoke new conflicts or brew and aggravate existing ones, as much as it can enhance a high degree of cohesive and cordial relationship. Mobile phones enable people to oversee or monitor their spouses and partners. Spouses check one another's handsets to make sure that things are fine and okay, or to find out more about a suspect behaviour – playing the detective. The mobile telephone is therefore an *actant* in the Latourian sense of the term, in that it has a vital presence, actively participating in family life by shaping patterns of communication between spouses, and negotiating and renegotiating power relations.

Moreover, this discussion suggests that studying the cultural reconstitution or translation of technological artefacts can shed light on the very nature of the cultural practice that the technologies configure and reconfigure. An inquiry into how mobile telephones can mediate social interaction between spouses and other close family members can help us subtly open up rather hidden spheres within the domestic environment for theoretical analysis.

#### NOTES

1. The interviews were conducted in Amharic and the author was responsible for translating them into English.
2. Archambault's (2011) ethnographic research among couples in Mozambique may be one of the first works to address this issue.
3. Even this exception is only apparent. As already hinted, the account of the 55-year-old man reveals that the phone is just like 'an empty box' when used by people like him. Others, so he witnessed, have learnt to lie with it and create a lot of problems in their lives.

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