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*The Travail of Dieudonné*

By FRANCIS B. NYAMNJOH (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers, 2008), 164 pp.

*Mobile Phones: the new talking drums of everyday Africa*

By MIRJAM DE BRUIJN, FRANCIS NYAMNJOH and INGE BRINKMAN, eds (Leiden, African Studies Centre/Bamenda, Cameroon, Langaa Research and Publishing, 2009), 173 pp.

Chopngomna is the only one of the habitués gathered in the Grand Canari bar who has a mobile phone; in fact, he 'owned two mobile phones – the latest cutest and most expensive Nokia and Samsung in town; phones endowed with the fanciest ring tones that made him a popular spectacle around Nyamandem'. The group assembled that day, a day that extended well into evening, however, was more intent on another kind of communication, Dieudonné's rambling account of his 'travail' – travail in the sense of ordeal, but also in the French sense of work or job, since *The Travail of Dieudonné*, written in English, is set in Mimboland/Cameroon, ruled by President Longstay, where French is but one of the colonial languages, and Dieudonné's storytelling is also inflected dramatically with local pidgin and indigenous aphorisms and proverbs, along with frequent Insha 'Allah's. Nor is Dieudonné interested in a mobile phone of his own, no matter how cute or sexy or even fancy the ringtone, although one of the local beer companies, his favourite, is sponsoring 'winning caps' that could, if he were lucky, land him such an otherwise prized possession. According to Dieudonné, 'I'm happy with the beer I win, the taxi men are happy with theirs, and so are the policemen who snatch winning caps from them to turn a blind eye at their traffic offences. In any case,' he goes on, 'mobile phones are much too unsafe in my neighborhood.'

If Dieudonné is not interested in mobile phones, at least not in possessing one of his own, the author of his *Travail* is, although for rather different reasons than Chopngomna, the government functionary and 'generous supplier' of rounds of King Size to the company convened at the Grand Canari for Dieudonné's life story. Francis Nyamnjoh, the sardonic Cameroonian novelist, is also head of publications for CODESRIA and professor of sociology at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. *Mobile Phones: the new talking drums of everyday Africa*, co-edited by Nyamnjoh with Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman, is the result of a collaboration between the African Studies Centre in Leiden and Langaa in Cameroon. The collection of nine scholarly social science essays opens, however, with an excerpt from another of Nyamnjoh's novels, *Married But Available* (2009), or MBA as the Grand Canari's denizens were wont to entitle that status. That chapter features Lilly Loveless, a Muzunguland researcher who loses her mobile phone in a local Mimboland taxi and learns a great deal instead about 'mobile communication and new social spaces in Africa' and its political economy from the 'most popular cell phone dealer in town'. As the introduction (de Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, Brinkman) points out, the

'literary text shows elements in the ethnography of the mobile margins that could be the starting point for academic research'.

That academic research provides the shifting continental focus of the eight essays that follow. Lotte Pelckmans, for example, discusses the implications of ever more popular adoption of the mobile phone for the 'practice and production of anthropological knowledge', based on her field work in Bamako, Mali, followed by Walter Gam Nkwi's discussion of the call-box and the mobile phone industry in Brea, Cameroon. Like Nkwi, whose essay relates as well the colonial background to the implementation of voice communication technologies in Africa, de Bruijn and Brinkman's discussion of the morality and socio-economic meanings of the mobile phone - particularly for women, students, businessmen, privacy issues, refugees and IDPs, and families - within the changing urban landscape of Khartoum opens with Sudan's contested colonial history. Thomas Molony, in turn, examines the relative advantages and disadvantages of this 'travel-saving technology' for the market wholesaler and his rural Tanzanian producers. The contrast between face-to-face encounters and long-distance contact is further elaborated in Ludovic Kabora's analysis of the levels of literacy and communication required and acquired in SMS and oral cultures in Burkina Faso. Similar questions of 'tradition' versus 'modernity' are raised by Wouter van Beek regarding an indigenous healer in Cameroon and his introduction of 'treatments by phone' to his pharmacopoeia. 'Follow the thing' geographies make up the itinerary of Julia Pfaff's 'biography' of but one mobile phone along the Swahili Corridor of the east coast of Africa. Finally, Jenna Burrell settles into several internet cafes in Accra, Ghana, to inquire into the other consequences of communication technologies: national development or global out-migration?

Meanwhile, back at the Grand Canari, even Dieudonné, although well-plied with bottles of King Size, is growing weary by now of the questions he is also plied with, by Dieumerci, his compatriot to be sure, but an aspiring anthropology student preparing a mini-dissertation at the local university and protégé of Professor Toubaaby (a Muzungulander), in whose employ Dieudonné carries out his daily travail, 'for, as another saying goes, appetite grows with eating, especially for those who have made a creed of greed. Dieumerci had convinced himself that there were aspects of Dieudonné's life he absolutely wanted to know, driven by the very same selfish academic reasons that had brought them to the Grand Canari.' Dieudonné, however - who has recounted at length his origins in civil strife-torn Warzone, his years of flight and exile in Mimboland, the recent departure of his second wife Tsanga, impatient with the pleasure that her seventh husband found in the joys of the bar rather than supporting her needs and desires - must, after all, rise early to leave Swine Quarter at a proper hour in order to appear punctually for his houseboy duties at the home of the Toubaabys in Beverly Hills. Neither Dieudonné, the dispirited storyteller, nor Dieumerci, the would-be ethnographer, would seem to have acquired a mobile phone by the end of *The Travail of Dieudonné*, but the 'talking drums' at the Grand Canari, where the latter has himself become a regular denizen, continue even to the novel's end, when 'Dieumerci, as usual, gives him reason to keep hope alive

with soothing words. "Those who say little things don't matter," he tells Dieudonné, "should know how the lion feels when a fly enters its nostrils." The 'mobile margins' of the new – and old – everyday Africa, their interconnected, interactive stories, continue to move and communicate in and across literary text and academic research alike.

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