Modernity in Material Form? Mobile Phones in the Careers of Ghanaian Market Women

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Abstract: Recent research on mobile phones in market exchange activities in the Global South has tended to dematerialise the phone narrowing its application to accord with disciplinary concerns rather than to its full range of material possibilities. This article seeks to expand the model of the mobile phone in socio-economic development by examining its uptake and adaptation among Ghanaian market women. The analysis considers development in terms of market women’s own self-defined notion of progress. Rather than leading to more impersonal and calculative trade relationships, their uses reflected deepening relations with trade partners and opportunities for enhanced affiliation at all levels.

Introduction

The global spread of the mobile phone has reached remote and rural regions in the Global South and populations living in conditions of marginality and scarcity. This article is concerned in particular with the scholarship on socio-economic development and the role that mobile phones are thought to play in its realisation. Such work is a point of intersection for scholars affiliated with a number of disciplines in (or aligned with) the social sciences, but is particularly influenced by the field of economics. More narrowly, the concern of this article is with the role of mobile phones in markets and trade activities getting to the heart of where development is still defined as a principally economic concern.

When grappled with by development economists the mobile phone has frequently been handled as a platform for information delivery of an impersonal sort and often specifically to deliver information on market prices (Jensen 2007; Eggleston et al 2002; Aker and Fafchamps 2010; Camacho and Conover 2011). Through such efforts to clearly specify relevant variables for the purpose of modeling, the mobile phone has become legible to specific scholarly debates within economics, specifically the problem of information asymmetries in markets. However, I argue that the trade-off of the clear, but narrow specificity in this approach is that a sense of the full life of such an artifact ‘in the
wild’ is obscured. The mobile phones multitude of possible functions and its indeterminate range of uses, its diverse material potentials are relocated to a small range of determinate and highly focused applications that generally adhere to the conceptual distinctions of a given discipline.

This ordinary disciplinary practice I theorize as an analytical tendency to ‘dematerialize’ the mobile phone, to treat it as a surface upon which selected scholarly concepts are carried. This is a general trend in the way the mobile phone has so far been handled in the social sciences, a trend not limited to economics. The matter of materiality in the social sciences has, as of late, undergone widespread reconsideration (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Ingold 2011). I argue below that one consequence of this dematerialization is that it has been difficult to shake the legacy of developmentalist thinking that understands material technological forms transferred from ‘the West’ as carriers of modernity. Technology transfer has a lengthy colonial history in Africa and elsewhere and a long association with such ideological baggage (Larkin 2008; Headrick 1988; Adas 1989). The reification of the mobile phone as modernity in material form sets expectations about the uptake of such tools. I wish to focus especially on the notion of the ‘autonomous self’ as an outcome of modernisation. In the context of how market activities are altered with the arrival of the mobile phones, this notion sets the expectation of a shift from personal to impersonal exchange relationships. It sets the expectation as well for a shift from the collective to the individual such that the mediation and buffering role once played by groups (defined by kinship and clan or by trader’s associations, etc) is replaced by differentiation amongst and competition between atomised market actors.

To ground this critique I examine the uptake of mobile phones among market women in urban Accra, Ghana and the multifaceted ways such devices are incorporated into their day-to-day trade practices. Trade as a profession is dominated by women in much of the West Africa region. In Ghana, this practice has a long history predating colonialism. In her canonical study of Asante women traders in Kejetia market in Kumasi, Ghana, Gracia Clark notes an ebb and flow of this trend historically. She points to an influx of women into the market around 1910 during the colonial era as men went into farming cocoa as a cash crop leaving vacant some of the market trade jobs they once occupied (Clark 1994). My recent observations from select markets in Accra (from 2011) including the massive central market Makola and more out of the way suburban markets shows that these spaces maintain a strong gender skew, with both buyers and sellers predominantly female. There is also a gendering of the products sold as well with household goods (imported and locally made), beauty products, farm produce, as well as prepared food exclusively sold by women. By contrast, the recent development of a market for electronic goods, including computers has been undertaken mostly by men (Burrell 2012).
The marginality of market women (and thus their targeting for ‘development’ efforts) can be related to both historical and contemporary events. During the late 1970s and early 1980s market women suffered persecution by a series of government-led “housecleaning” exercises including raids in the market by the military and police, the confiscation of goods, and attempts to enforce price controls. Market women became scapegoats and were accused of hoarding and collusion. It was this time period through which many of today’s senior leaders of the market managed, despite these barriers, to survive and to build their businesses. In the present era, market women often pointed to lack of opportunity that prevented them from furthering their education and taking up employment in white-collar office jobs. They refer to the work as hard and low status. The popular perception (though certainly not true in all cases) was that market women were “illiterates.” Many struggled with vulnerabilities - to theft in particular and the absence of insurance schemes. A recent fire that wiped out the Mallam Market in Accra shows how a lifetime’s careful work can be gone in an instant. Media coverage of the event pointed to ongoing tensions with the government and mistrust of politicians. The lower status attributed to such women in Ghana’s urban society is excepted by the few market women who manage to become quite affluent and exert considerable influence and power both in the market space itself and in their extended families and communities.

**Information as the Substance of the Modernizing Market**

The very recent literature on mobile phones in African and other markets of the Global South reflects a divergence between approaches that focus on phones as platforms for impersonal information circulation and approaches (which are often situated as a critique of this info-centric stance) that point to the need for trusted relationships between trading partners and that specifically require face-to-face, unmediated interaction. When it comes to information, the primary empirical concern has been with ‘information asymmetries’ that make markets inefficient, especially traders’ lack of knowledge about where and from whom to get the best price for their goods. The question raised is whether this can be resolved by the mobile phone with its capacity to lower search costs by allowing traders to, for example, place a quick and inexpensive call instead of having to physically travel to a distant market to find out price. Convincing evidence presented in studies by two economists indicates that this is so (Jensen 2007, Aker 2008). Trust, on the other hand is about the social nature of the relationship between market exchange partners. The key question investigated is whether trust-building practices in market activities that have been previously carried out face-to-face might be mediated by the phone instead (Donner 2007, Jagun et al 2008, Overa 2005, Molony 2007). When trust and information are related analytically in this cross-disciplinary literature, they are typically placed in opposition. For example, the demands of ‘trust’ between trading partners has often been used to question the utility of (impersonal) information in market transactions.
The opposition set up between information search and trust-building is in line with a prevailing definition of information as impersonal and as independent of source, a definition that is Euro-American in origins (Webster 2006). Thus the mobile phone once recast as an information delivery platform (as opposed to a device of interpersonal communication) is kept in tune with a notion of its modernising effect on market actors who are depicted as engaging in data-driven reasoning that is abstracted from their trade relationships. The use of the mobile phone when narrowed down even further to a particular informational practice, that of market price comparison for strategic profit maximization, makes the device over as a catalyst of individualistic capitalistic competition in the market. It generally goes unquestioned in such scholarship that ‘information’ (by this definition) is enhanced, increased, or even brought into existence by the mobile phone.

A dependence upon trusted relationships in trade is often portrayed as a special problem, as Molony describes it, of “African business culture” (Molony 2008: 639). Economists aligned with the New Institutional Economics (NIE) school discuss the reliance on ‘trusted’ trade partners (i.e. limiting one’s trade partners to those one has a record of successful transactions with) as a functionalist adaptation to the particular constraints of certain market environments (Fafchamps 2004). The NIE school handles the need for ‘trust’ in transactions as a reflection of the political context, specifically weak institutional supports for legal enforcement of contracts. In other words the need for trust compensates for what are understood as inadequacies in the baseline market context.

The relationship of the mobile phone specifically to trust-building is treated equivocally by scholarship in this space. In relation to the mobile phone specifically, research with an anthropological or ethnographic bent has asked whether trust-building or being a trustworthy trade partner is compatible with mediated communication over the phone. Molony argues for the incompatibility of the mobile phone with trust in trade relationships in his study of Tanzanian business networks and the trade in perishable foodstuffs and blackwood carvings. He highlights the success of one particular trader who refuses to employ a phone and laments “I don’t trust the telephone; it always lies…” a reference specifically to time delays between communicating by phone (about price for example) and when the actual exchange of goods takes place (Molony 2007). Following Molony’s account of phones from the earliest days of their diffusion in Tanzania, there has been a tendency to attribute the ongoing necessity of face-to-face interaction in trade to the demands of trust-building (see Jagun et al. 2008, Donner 2007), but without direct investigation into whether this is a truly sufficient explanation for the case at hand.

The research focusing on trust has provided case studies that call the mobile phones ‘modernising’ impact into question. However, by showing the mobile phones muted or absent impact in expanding trade networks toward more impersonal relationships, such research may be read as further evidence that such ‘third-world’ markets are entrenched
in inefficiencies against which the mobile phone is disappointingly ineffective. Such a critique does not offer an alternative model and therefore does not manage to shake off the underlying association between the mobile phone and modernisation.

The modeling by economists focused centrally on “information” as the transformative substance of modernising markets and the response and critique by other social scientists thus follows a longstanding dichotomization of the modern and the traditional that has been aptly critiqued in work on alternative modernities in African Studies (Moore and Sanders 2002; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Piot 1999). Close observation of the range and diversity of practices of mobile phone use among Ghanaian market women helps to challenge this dichotomy. At the time of this fieldwork market women had by and large incorporated mobile phones as valued tools supporting their market activities. Among this population the mobile phone was widely recognised as offering a new capacity for social extension, coordination work, as well as information acquisition, with the latter always inextricably connected to these other capacities.

The autonomy of the specifically ‘modern’ self as connected to liberation from ‘space’ is asserted in theories of modernity (see especially Giddens 1990). Garcia-Montes et al (2006) make the argument in relation to the mobile phone by suggesting that it is individual ownership of phones (in place of the prior association of phones with places – the office, the home) that moves its users in the direction of “individualization.” The authors suggest communication practices have become decentralized by the mobile phone undermining the way “local institutions” previously mediated or surveilled such communication. Yet, as much as a new relationship to time and space was, in fact, recognized by Ghanaian market women themselves as following from the mobile phone, their actual practices of phone use call into question the notion that market actors are made more resistant to affiliation or hierarchical organization, or more competitive and self-interested by the mobile phone. Instead alternate logics of enhanced intimacy and affiliation prove to be equally as plausible in the Ghanaian context.

Ghanaian Market Women and Their Mobile Phones

As a way to more fully escape the baggage of this association between technology and modernisation and to explore other potential trajectories of development, the following analysis aims to loosely reframe development in terms of a self-defined and self-determined notion of progress among market actors as it is brought to bear in their use of the mobile phone. The terms used by market women to describe their mobile phones expresses how greatly they valued their phones as a tool of trade. They spoke about them in strong and enthusiastic terms, expressing none of the ambivalence toward the phone of traders highlighted in prior accounts (i.e. Molony 2007). A relatively affluent seller of cloth in an out-of-the way market on the outskirts of Accra said of her phone, “oh, it has helped me a lot! As for phone, it helped me a lot, a lot, a lot.” At Makola market in central Accra, a seller of secondhand clothes noted, “the phone is very important in my
business.” A fishmonger declared “Yes, it helps, it helps!” These are unequivocal responses, enhanced with intensifiers (very, a lot). From this starting point, I refer to the socio-economic development possibilities loosely according to this attributed value.

These findings are drawn from a focused nine week period of ethnographic work in several markets in Ghana from June through August 2011 building upon seven years of periodic fieldwork on various aspects of urban life in Accra and in particular some prior research on the trade in secondhand computers. Three markets in particular are the focus of this analysis. First, Accra’s largest market, the centrally located Makola market (and surrounds) which is intensely crowded with retailers and customers. There I visited main street boutiques, as well as trekking through the rabbit’s warren of stalls and stands rented out by less affluent sellers. A second market referred to as Market A was more remotely located and serving a customer base living mostly in its surrounding local neighborhood and struggled with supply issues due to this remoteness. Finally, interviews were carried out at a third market B near Tema located on the outskirts of Accra. I focused especially on the prestigious cloth trade as well as secondhand clothing and the far less prestigious trade in farmed goods and perishables. In total 29 market women participated in in-depth interviews. This covered a broad generational span from the elders and market queens to the younger generation, some of whom were beginning careers in the market while others were biding their time before moving on to work in other sectors. The complete list of interviewees is attached as an appendix. To give a sense of diversity among the market women interviewed, their roles are differentiated as “ohemmas” (market leaders), “mothers,” “daughters,” and “transitional daughters” a typology further explained in the elaboration of trade and phone use practices below.

The gendering of this particular income-generating activity helps to unseat assumptions easily obscured where the income-earning worker is normatively male. Grint in his analysis of work and its place in social theory argues that “work, employment and home are all necessarily intertwined” and that definitions of work and sites for studying it must be consciously extended in order for theory to be more inclusive of women (Grint 1991). His proposal for studying homes and family caretaking as spaces of work follows from a division of labor that in certain periods in many Western industrialised nations marked an especially sharp division between work and home. The opportunity presented here, by contrast, following from the anthropological impulse to seek out diversity and exceptionality in cultural practices, is the blurring of this automatic association between women and non-remunerated labor.

This observation of Ghanaian women’s societally-recognised entitlement to take up income-earning roles in the market does not equate to a more all-encompassing inversion of gender roles, a simple switching of a Western gender binary. Moore points to the problem (which I intend to avoid here) whereby researchers read asymmetries in the roles of men and women in other cultures and equate them to the patterns of inequity and
hierarchy of Western societies (Moore 1988). Normatively, Ghanaian women also had responsibilities for more typically female gendered activities such as child-rearing and cooking. Their behavior was measured against archetypes of the good woman (obaa pa) and a kind of inverse ‘lioness woman’ (obaa gyata) which had negative connotations. Religious belief and especially biblical instructions in the dominantly Christian southern city has also shaped the way market women related to one another and to their customers. Ultimately this also shaped the ways they employed the mobile phone in the market place.

Speaking with market women about their attitudes and approaches to trade as it relates to the mobile phone, three broad and distinctive categories of practice emerge that help to organise and highlight the reorientation of time and space via the mobile phone as leading toward social contact and intimacy, toward interpersonal trust, and extending opportunities for affiliation rather than necessarily eliminating this need in exchange relationships. First, there is the work done by market women employing their phones to manage transactions and one-to-one trade relationships. Among market women in Ghana, the phones utility in these practices is best characterised as enlivening trade networks as opposed to impersonally acquiring or exchanging information. Second, market women are concerned with issues of professional identity, group affiliation, and marketplace governance. At this level the phone came into play (in a limited sense) toward enhancing affiliative activities. Finally, mobile phone use underlines generational differences and questions of legacy. In particular the non-use of mobile phones for trade related activities among younger women (“daughters”) reflected their role working under the direction of their elders in the market. Some, with their mother’s encouragement, (“transitional daughters”) envisioned the future of their families outside of this laborious work entirely. For this select group, the mobile phone’s role in social mobility and networking toward an exit from the market was consistent with broader trends in the use of digital communications among youth in Ghana (Slater and Kwami 2005, Burrell 2012).

**Enlivening Trade Networks**

*During the day Mary (who was referred to be a Twi nickname ‘Obolo’ meaning literally ‘the fat one’) awaits arriving suppliers of her wholesale yam, plantain, and cassava business in a wooden shed which also serves as protected and enclosed storage. The shed is outfitted with a wooden desk. She has two mobile phones laid out in front of her, essential tools of her trade for drumming up business from suppliers out in the farming hinterlands.*

*In the midst of the interview Mary places a call to a supplier. The one-sided call overheard is as follows:*
“maame yaa, ah for this long time I have called you...then stand at a good place for me to talk to you, Would you come tomorrow by God’s grace?”
“you will start the journey tomorrow”
“have you got some of the cocoyam and plantain to bring to me?”
“so will you bring me some tomorrow? I can’t hear what you are saying.”
“cocoyam, if you got some of the remains and pieces like you gave to me last time, let them package it well because it’s too dear, we don’t get anything from it when we sell it because people don’t buy things.”
“how are your grand children in the village and your mother...”
“...Right I will come tomorrow, okay don’t sell all, I will keep plantain to ripe so don’t sell all, I will come, so try hard.”
“bye, bye”

As a wholesaler of a farmed good that is perishable, Mary, more than many other market women, relies upon the phone for maintaining long-distance ties. Threaded through the phone call she alternately coaxes and counsels. She asks that the supplier attentively oversee the process for her ensuring that “they package it well” to prevent spoiling. Employing a strategy I frequently observed among market women negotiating with customers, she characterises her effort to distribute and sell the goods as though it were a favor, “we don’t get anything from it” she insists. Discussing the timing of arrival she does a bit of lightweight coordination work and assures of her own availability to receive the shipment. She also asks after her supplier’s kin.

Looking at phone use specifically in relation to market transactions, it was not difficult to gain examples from market women of recent instances as well as general patterns of mobile phone use. Overheard calls such as the above were rare, but are valuable in offering closer observation of all the details of such trade-oriented conversation. Market women typically expressed a limited form of concern over information on prices, though much of the literature on mobile phones in trade practices treats price as hugely significant (Eggleston et al. 2002). Price entered into their decision-making generally only to determine the markup that would ensure an acceptable profit. A variety of other kinds of information were also exchanged in these phone calls.

Market women often described making calls, as the example of Mary above demonstrates, with the intent of enlivening their trade networks. Mary described how she would “call my [suppliers] to find out how they are faring.” A seller of secondhand clothes at Makola market says “when I get more [goods] I am able to contact my customers to come.” A seller of shoes imported from China, also at Makola, similarly notes, “I call them there are new goods so come. They also call me [to ask] ‘I want these goods, do you have?’” This application of the phone played the role of advertising, a reminder to a customer about a frequently visited market stall. It was also a form of customer service providing notification about the arrival of a requested good, a way of
showing that the seller has her customer’s interests in mind. Similarly, calls between market women and the wholesalers / suppliers they purchased goods from often involved requests to set aside quantities for later pick up. Depending upon the relationship with this supplier it could mean favorable treatment, such as setting aside higher quality goods.

Through her work to enliven her supply network, Mary was able to boost supply to her out-of-the-way market that would otherwise not draw such suppliers by default. She worked especially hard to host visiting suppliers. As she describes it, “I have to settle [the visiting supplier] very fine.” This meant even giving small gifts, “And when she is leaving, you have to give her something...you will buy soap. You have to treat the person nicely, if you don’t, she will not bring the goods because there are so many markets where they will treat her nicely if she takes it there.” In this way Mary distinguished her market through her service orientation. She was able to extend this solicitous attitude toward her suppliers from afar via her phone.

Information is an element of these phone exchanges, but not ‘information’ as defined apart from relationships and sources. Mary provides information specifically about the demand in her market (in terms of quantities demanded). In the coordination work described by many market women, what is exchanged by phone is information about one’s present location, predictions about time of arrival, details that help to smooth the eventual in-person exchange between buyer and seller. Information (about road conditions or vehicle breakdowns) enhances perceptions of reliability (as also noted by Overa 2006). In communicating about road conditions or delays, trade partners created a transparency that was trust-enhancing but at the same time, could also improve market efficiencies by better timing hand-offs and avoiding problems of delays that lead to waste of perishable goods. Trusted relationships were clearly enhanced by the consideration that these women communicated by placing a phone call and by what was imparted over the phone that later proved to be true.

The additional value of the phone in the work of coordination relates also to a more generalised “well-being” that market women identified as coming from the phone and specifically, relief from the strain of such work. What is often omitted in more conceptual handling of markets as spaces of calculative activity is that this work can be quite physically grueling. This constitutes another kind of dematerialisation, that of the work of trade activities. Hamdiya, an elderly Muslim woman who sells spices and other goods from northern Ghana, like many market women, described the work as “tiring.” A cloth trader Mama Akosua at market A noted, “I’m not having that strength like first that I started.” Another cloth trader at Makola market, Mama Dorcas, described her approach to trade as she entered her 50s as, “take it easy, relax, and control my BP [blood pressure].” She had quit the international travel stints (for the purpose of purchasing goods) of her younger days and described her phone as helping her to avoid unnecessary
local trips. A number of market women described injuries or mysterious illnesses of uncertain duration. There were health benefits of the phone that market women point to, including reduced exposure to car fumes, avoiding traffic jams (a growing problem in Accra), and improved sleep. Physical disability, such as from road accidents, is a major damper on income generation (Mock et al 1999). Finding ways to continue work while coping with health problems or ordinary processes aging, may ensure the ability of market women to work in the market for longer, especially as they are able to work in closer coordination with family and employees (kept in regular contact by mobile phone) who can do a greater share of the heavy lifting.

**Enhancing Affiliative Activities**

Market women in Accra, like those operating out of markets in many parts of the world, are subject to oversight by governing bodies specific to the market. They may come together to form associations, unions, or other kinds of collectives (such as savings groups) to enhance their capacities as traders. A selective focus on the mobile phone’s role in mediating transactions (and especially the buyer/seller dyad) generally precludes consideration of the role played by these groups. Nonetheless, when asked more generally about trade practices, market women mention the central significance of many types of groups and forms of affiliation to their trade activities and their overall social identity. The role of the mobile phone in this aspect of trade was more limited than its essential utility in managing transactions and trade relationships (especially across distance) given the proximity of market women to one another within the market space. Nonetheless, in a few cases the phone had both direct and indirect consequences for group organising and affiliation.

In Ghana, a particular governance structure in the marketplace has developed, modeled after traditional chieftaincy structures. A group of women who sell the same commodity are led by a powerful commodity “queen” (in Twi, *ohemma*). This means that in a given market there is a yam queen, a corn dough queen, and a fishmonger queen, etc. Above these women in the hierarchy is the overall market queen. Such leaders play many roles. They mediate conflicts between traders or with customers, work with municipal authorities on sanitation and other infrastructure issues, and oversee the application and distribution of group loans from banks or NGOs. Such groups offer a kind of relational (rather than asset based) collateral to secure loans for members.

The necessity of and the specific role played by market governance has to do, in part, with trade as a practice that takes place in a limited physical space. Traders come to these markets day in and day out and come to know one another as something akin to coworkers. Such a space also draws in many others seeking an income, such as the ubiquitous market preachers. Space itself becomes a scarce resource. The comments of market leaders, the ohemmas of the Accra markets, made clear that conflict, verbal
altercations (in Twi, the word frequently used was *akasakasa* meaning ‘quarreling’) are viewed poorly. At the extreme they may even be seen as a spiritual threat (Clark 1994, pg. 262). Smooth social relations are prized as a sign of a well run and managed market and those traders who violate these norms are sanctioned or even expelled permanently from the market.

The mobile phone played into market governance by making possible a more timely response from the appropriate market queen. This response might prevent conflicts from festering leading to more damaging eruptions that might lead to expulsion from the market. For example Mama Akosua (a cloth seller, but who had been appointed the corn dough queen) notes that when conflicts arise, she receives calls. As she notes, “*maybe I’m not here, I was in Accra...I’ve travelled, they will say ‘there’s a conflict between one of them, so where are you? We want to come to you.’*” Generally day-to-day proximity made the phone less critical for this than it was to traders maintaining relationships with suppliers and customers at distance. Much could be resolved by simply passing by the stall of the market queen when she was in.

Many market women commented that having a mobile phone had made them far less bound to place, especially to their market stalls. Beatrice, a secondhand clothing seller at Makola noted, “The phone is very important in my business, without the phone when I am not at the market and there is some information it will not reach me.” Joyce, a seller of men’s trouser cloth and school uniforms in market B commented, “when someone comes around to look for me and I am not around the person can easily contact me on the mobile phone.” This was recognized in at least one case as an opportunity for further affiliative activities. Manuela, the daughter of Mama Akosua pointed out that her own mother’s involvement with a locally-founded Christian organisation called “Women’s Aglow” was made possible by this newfound locational freedom. A market woman’s employee or child could be more confidently left in charge of a shop since customer questions could be forwarded by phone.

The draw and significance of social welfare groups in Ghana should not be underestimated. Beyond work of immediate relevance to market trade (such as negotiating conflict, managing group loans, etc.) membership in these groups ensures attendance and financial contributions at family funerals (the pinnacle social event in the life cycle, particularly for the Akan in Ghana) (Lyon 2003, de Witte 2001). The commodity groups lead by market queens play an important social welfare role, appearing at (and contributing donations) at the funerals of members and their relatives. Market women organized under an ohemma also contribute to the social welfare of members. Mama Gloria, the president of the cloth trader’s association at Makola market notes,

“*since we are human, we may die, some have become old. If due to old age you have*
become weak or you are suffering from a disease and you are not able to come to the market, we pay you a visit and present you with some amount of money for food. In case one passes away, we organize funeral for that individual. We have a book here that has records of all the names of the members. When a member dies, each one of us makes a contribution and we use that to hire drums, speakers and other gadgets necessary for the funeral programme.”

The mobile phone may touch upon all aspects of these social welfare functions by spreading the word of an event, such as a death, illness, hospitalisation, or birth so that members can start to pool funds and make plans for visitation, as well as facilitating the organization of funeral programs, etc. Apart from the mobile phone, other technologies come into play in solidifying this affiliation work and the codes of membership. While at a cloth market in Makola, I listened to a public address system announcing the death of a member’s mother and instructing other members to get ready to contribute and attend. Notably, the member had gone abroad, but had nonetheless been dutifully paying her membership dues. Internally at one of the mobile phone network operators in Ghana, the sudden increase in activity on the network from what were low-volume phone users, was referred to as “funeral traffic.” The notion that mobile phones as individually owned devices, produce ‘modern’ market actors who operate more autonomously, supplanting the need for groups and undermining their oversight, is thus challenged by the continuing pressures of day-to-day proximity in the market and the way the mobile phone can serve leaders and members in extending the long arm of enforcement and organizing.

**Networking toward an Exit**

Shifting to the family as the context within which notions of collective development are defined and pursued further broadens the analysis beyond a notion of progress that is confined to the market and activities of income-earning therein. Many market women were motivated by a desire for upward mobility. Noting these underlying aspirations is necessary to make sense of the strategies (beyond the immediate day-to-day optimization of trade) that drive market women’s trade practices and that sometimes implicate the mobile phone. Many were especially motivated to provide sufficiently for the education of their sons and daughters so that they might gain employment outside of the market, generally in white-collar office work.

We can consider further the gendering of trade in relation to this practice as well. As already noted, the time flexibility of this work (specifically the aspect of self-employment and being able to close up shop, arrive late, or leave early) was often pointed to as highly compatible with Ghanaian women’s household and child-rearing duties. At the same time, it was also considered the duty of mature married women to contribute economically to the family (Darkwah 2007, Dolphyne 1991).
The values upheld in Ghanaian markets that emphasise harmonious relationships are tied to the friction of conflict that can harm market efficiency, but is undoubtedly in its particular form, quite gendered. In these markets the accusation of “customer stealing” by one market woman against another was taken seriously by market ohemmas, reinforcing the practice of maintaining long-lived relationships between a particular trader and her customers. This explains something of the mobile phone’s use toward reinforcing relationships, toward securing loyal customers, enhanced intimacy rather than toward depersonalised trade relationships. Stories of spiritual harm from conflict were commonly told. One I heard featured a market woman who cursed a tax collector whom later died. Such tales always featured a female antagonist. This is entangled with the syncretic religious landscape of urban Ghana that combines animist belief, Christianity, and notions of occult practice and witchcraft. There were continual reminders of such values and beliefs in the messages of the novice preachers I observed everyday who work in the markets loudly preaching biblical verse often using amplifiers.

The gender norms that market women’s competitive behavior are tempered by are made more explicit through some of the terminology I witnessed in use in the market. The term ‘oba gyata,’ a pejorative term that translates to “lioness woman” was invoked in two separate sermons (one by a market preacher, one a women-led gathering of the ‘Women’s Aglow’ Christian group). It refers to a woman who is ‘cold’ or ‘hard’ or ‘too proud’ or who engages in ‘backbiting.’ There were frequent calls in such sermonising for women to be ‘modest’ and to avoid ‘greed.’ Other qualities of such a woman, she gets into conflicts or participates in violence, she brings about “confusion” or disorderliness wherever she goes. ‘What name do people call you in your area?’ women were asked in both of these sermons that mentioned ‘oba gyata.’ Market women were (through various modes of communication including sermons) encouraged to concern themselves with what others think of them, their social reputation, and to seek to reform it if necessary.

The ultimate aim of many market women was a legacy in land (including putting up and owning their own house). Besides acquiring land, their own definitions of success were generally defined in relational terms, especially in terms of the welfare and future prospects of their children. The fishmonger ohemma of market A noted that her modest trade in fish was, “my source of help in caring for my children.” The energy market women brought to trade activities, as was observed in the enlivening of their trade networks by phone, was above all to ensure that their trade was continuous and unbroken, that there was sufficient supply and a healthy stream of customers making purchases. The focus on continuity maps to the concern with raising children and seeing to it that they progress through school ideally through University without facing the all-too-common breaks in schooling many young Ghanaians face as a consequence of lack of funds.

The setting of the market was multi-generational and market women often brought their young children, after school and while on breaks, and put them to work. In the past
daughters inherited businesses from their mothers, but many elder market women mentioned a daughter at ‘University’ who would not come to work in the market. “She is intelligent,” the fishmonger ohemma in market A said by way of explanation. In the current period, the generation of nearly adult daughters in the market while they worked under the wing of a mother were less responsible for maintaining contact with customers or making arrangements with suppliers. In the market context and in relation to day-to-day trade practices and livelihood pursuits, non-use of the mobile phone for trade-related activities was characteristic of the ‘daughters’ in the market.

On the other hand, the generation of “daughters” in the market all possessed phones (often flashy off-brand or counterfeit smartphones) but used them for non-trade related purposes. A case of one of these “transitional daughters,” that of Bernice, who sometimes managed her mother’s tomato stand, used her phone in the market to play music and chat with friends. Some of these ‘friends’ were people living abroad that she had met in online chat rooms, a form of networking on a vast geographic scale previously observed in Accra’s Internet cafes and now increasingly possible on network connected smartphones (Burrell 2012). Bernice used her phone also to maintain her network of school friends. This was part of a symbolic detachment from the market space, also performed, for example, by Manuela another “transitional daughter” in market A who demonstrated her literacy and non-belonging while working at her mother’s stall by prominently reading a book (titled “Spearhead: how to lead your generation”). The ‘old boys’ and ‘old girls’ alumni associations of Ghana’s most prestigious private and boarding schools and Universities, were yet another affiliation group (like the social welfare groups and the religious association’s like ‘Women’s Aglow’) that young Ghanaians knew could one day play a role in securing their employment. For Bernice the continuous phone calls and online chatting with friends nearby and abroad was not merely leisurely socializing, killing time while market activities were slow, but also part of strategies of networking toward an exit from the market.

**Conclusion:**

This article serves as a call to consider more closely aligning scholarship on mobile phones and socio-economic development with the values and priorities of mobile phone users acknowledging their active role and capacity to ‘do development’ (that is, strategize about and pursue familial or group well-being and advancement) on their own behalf. Market women employed the mobile phone, engaging with the material possibilities it offered to pursue this advancement. The accounts of phone use by market women challenge the notion that the mobile phone either effects a modernization of trade activities (through the circulation of impersonal information that allows for optimized decision-making) or that the relational basis of trade in long-standing relationships of trust renders the mobile phone less effective. A different model entirely was required to capture and make sense of the enthusiasm for the mobile phone and to explain the
situated logic (of culture, aspiration, and marginality) of practices of phone use of these market women.

The emergent model draws from a notion of markets as work places and of market women’s sense of career. The capacity to connect across greater distances, to be less bound to the market stall was indeed significant to market women. However, the interactions market women pursued through the mobile phone reflected deepening relations one-to-one and opportunities for enhanced affiliation through groups. Such a reordering accorded with a sensibility toward trade activities oriented not just by calculation and strategies of income generation, but risk management, status enhancement, and ensuring or strengthening family legacy.

Expanding market women’s opportunities to join social welfare and religious groups or alleviating the physical strain and stress of trade (by eliminating unnecessary trips) may seem like minor gains that hardly merit the label of ‘development.’ On the other hand they may be the starting point for tiny adjustments that add up to consequences in long-standing categories of developmental concern – health, education, financial security and risk mitigation, etc. The role of the phone in aiding traders to avoid wasted trips has often been cast in terms of market efficiency, saving time and money (ultimately yielding better and more predictable income). However, the determined investment of these market women’s consistent (if not always generous) profits in the education of their children has consequences that are more long-term and not likely to be reflected in the short-term efforts to measure market efficiency gains that follow from mobile phone use.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Generational Group</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary (“Obolo”)</td>
<td>Ohemma</td>
<td>Yam trader/ wholesaler</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Market</td>
<td>Ohemma</td>
<td>Cloth/textiles</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohemma</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama Grace</td>
<td>Ohemma</td>
<td>Smoked fish</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernice</td>
<td>Transitional daughter</td>
<td>Tomatoes and garden eggs</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama Akosua</td>
<td>Ohemma</td>
<td>Cloth/textiles, shoes, clothing accessories</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuela</td>
<td>Transitional Daughter</td>
<td>Cloth/textiles, shoes, clothing accessories</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precious</td>
<td>Transitional Daughter</td>
<td>Plastic goods, cooking pots, utensils</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yam Wholesaler</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yams</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naa</td>
<td>Transitional Daughter</td>
<td>Smoked fish</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
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<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Transitional Daughter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamdiya</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Spices</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loretta</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Chinese imported shoes (wholesaler)</td>
<td>Makola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Chinese imported shoes</td>
<td>Makola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Akua</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Beauty products</td>
<td>Makola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Fruit (hawker)</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>Auntie Regina</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Clothing boutique</td>
<td>Makola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abena</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Peppers, spices, tinned tomatoes</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgina</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Provisions</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Type of Relative</td>
<td>Trade / Products</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama Dorcas</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Cloth / textiles</td>
<td>Makola</td>
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<td>Ohemma</td>
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<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Funeral cloth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nana</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Shoes and cloth</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Grace</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Sells vegetables</td>
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<td>Mother</td>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama Sarah</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Cosmetics</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auntie Comfort</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Cloth (textiles)</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joyce</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Trouser cloth, school uniforms</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama Lizzy</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Cloth (textiles)</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The physically grueling demands of market trade become very apparent in research conducted through ethnographic immersion, see also (Clark 2005)
3. As a reflection of the Akan/Twi language which identifies both mothers and maternal aunts as ‘maame’ and extending to cultural practices of childrearing, adult daughters in the market could be working for a mother or another older female relative.
4. All listed names are pseudonyms