Universität Basel

Publication

Mirror Images: mediated sociality and the presence of the future

Today, most Africans who have a mobile phone have become photographers while professional photographers are going out of business. Picture files displayed on the small screens increasingly replace photoprints. This transformation affects the use of pictures deeply. It facilitates the exchange of pictures and broadens the ways in which ordinary people situate themselves in a social context and how they imagine their own place in their future life-worlds. This contribution looks at how the use of pictures has changed since the incredibly rapid proliferation of smartphones in northern Côte d'Ivoire. It examines smartphones as storage devices and how and when picture files are displayed on the screens of phones. It traces social practices of displaying and commenting on pictures through different social milieus by juxtaposing three examples: the shared watching of pictures in private spaces; the display of pictures as proofs of a specific event, in this case a pilgrimage to Mecca; and finally the use of smartphones as albums to demonstrate artisanal skills. I argue that such practices do not foster a devaluation of the picture but rather endow it with new meanings, as the case of a gay couple shows. Pictures on phones are used to imagine a possible, alternative future of the actors in a changing life-world.