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## Cellphones bring a :-) to remotest Africa

**Namibia's plucky fix-it industry handles all manner of disaster: Melted phone? No problem. Dead battery? Jump start it with a car.**

**By Stephanie Hanes** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

### Opuwo, Namibia

If your cellphone breaks in remote northern Namibia, your best hope rests in the decapitated flatbed of a long-dead Toyota pickup, not far from the only tarred road in the dusty town of Opuwo.

On the flatbed sits an aluminum-sided shack, identified by a hand-painted sign: Okau Cell Part & Repair Shop. Inside you'll see a generator, a car battery, a smattering of dusty pink phone jackets, and a dozen different chargers hanging like sausage in a butcher shop. This is where Jack Nendongo works his magic.

"I do all repairs," he says, watching three women in traditional Himba tribal garb – thick beaded necklaces over bare breasts and animal-skin skirts – walk by. "People here, they must have their cellphones."

He doesn't just fix phones, he explains. For less than a dollar he charges them – a much needed service in a region where more villages have cellphones than electricity.

Over the past decade, the number of cellphone users in Africa has grown faster than anywhere else in the world. According to Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Entrepreneurial Programming and Research on Mobiles unit, the continent's cellphone usage has increased about 65 percent annually for the past five years – from about 63 million users in 2004 to 152 million in 2006.

"Cellphones are in the deepest rural areas in Africa," says Saadhna Panday, of South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council. "More people have access to a cellphone than a land line."

And the way people use and care for their mobile phones is different than in the wealthy, BlackBerry-addicted West. Here, people send text messages to friends, but also use their cells to do banking and organize political rallies. In areas with no TV, farmers use phones to get agricultural news and weather reports. (The Kenya Agricultural Commodity Exchange, for instance, sends text messages with up-to-date market prices.) In townships, entrepreneurs will set up cellphone booths, where passers-by can use airtime for a slightly inflated price.

In all these ways, says Panday, cellphones have increased networking among Africans and have lessened the global "digital divide" between haves and have nots.

"Young people today, more than any generation, have digital savvy," she says. "They all have access to SMS [short message service] and cellphones."

Africa has its own cell etiquette. Here, people tend to buy airtime as they go – cell contracts similar to the ones people use in the US tend to require a higher monthly income than the majority earn – and there is much maneuvering to save "units." Most Namibians, for instance, touch base with one another by inexpensive SMS.

"Especially on Fridays," says Betty Matthews, a resident of Katatura, the township of Windhoek, Namibia's capital city.

Why Fridays?

"Because it's free!" she exclaims incredulously, in unison with two friends who are standing next to her. They explain that on Fridays, one cell company offers free SMS-ing, so friends tend to wait until the end of the week to connect. Ms. Matthews says that many people also have two or more phones, each with SIM (subscriber identity module) cards from different providers, so they can take advantage of the day's best deals.

There are other techniques to use another person's airtime instead of yours. You might "beep" someone –

repeatedly, if necessary – by calling and hanging up after one ring. Or you can send a "please call" message, which is free because it's attached to a text advertisement. Or, better yet, you can SMS a free message asking someone to transfer money to your account – the best antidote to the "please recharge" message that plagues those who have burned through their units.

"Usually I'll send that to my girlfriends," says a Namibian who gives his name only as Enrico because he doesn't want his girlfriends to realize the word is plural. "They always send me minutes."

It's not too surprising, then, that the all-valuable "unit" has its place in pop culture – the Congolese group Zaiko Langa Langa, for instance, sings, "Ba unités nionso ya bolingo esili pasi na ngai veuiller recharger moncompteur d'amour."

"All of love's units are used up. Please recharge my love account."

In this part of the world, people often try to fix their cellphones when technological disaster strikes rather than buying new ones, which range from \$30 to \$2,000. (In a region where most people live on less than \$2 a day, even the least expensive phone is an investment.)

This has sparked a new sort of business in both rural areas and city townships: the independent cellphone repair shop. Mr. Nendongo's shop in Opuwo, for instance, is one of five owned by a local businessman. And his company is only one of many. "We have too much competition these days," he sighs.

The day before, Nendongo fixed a customer's cellphone that had partly melted in the brutal Namibian heat. (He attached the phone battery to a car battery and jump-started it, he says.) But he says that this week has mostly been quiet – he is waiting for a new stock of cell accessories, which sell well at the end of the month.

Usually housed in some form of shipping container or shack, establishments like the Okau Cell Part & Repair Shop are often manned by a mobile phone company employee in off hours, or sometimes by a cellphone mechanic who has gone independent.

"The guys in Katatura are less expensive than the cellphone shops," says Matthews, who recently dropped off her phone and its broken screen at one such establishment. "But there you must be very slick."

She explains that sometimes the local shop owners will take parts from a client's phone and replace them with older items.

Enrico agrees with Matthews's assessment of the independent repair shops. But he says his problem these days isn't that his phone is broken, but that it is lost – along with the information for 150 or so contacts he had programmed into it. He shakes his head at the thought.

"Eish," he says. "All my numbers. Now, I'm writing everything down in a book."

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