



# Western

Centre for Research on  
Migration and Ethnic Relations

Fall Colloquium  
Series 2014



## *First Phones In Last Places: Mobility And Cell Phone Use In Papua New Guinea*



**Dan Jorgensen**

**Department of Anthropology  
Western University**

Cell phone connectivity has expanded rapidly in the global South, and communications technologies that ten years ago were the perks of high-end executives are now part of the everyday lives of people in the developing world. This is a profoundly global phenomenon, but its local effects are surprisingly poorly understood. In this paper I examine the spread of digital connectivity in Papua New Guinea with an eye to understanding the specificities of cell phone use and their effects. PNG's mainly poor rural population is spread over difficult terrain, with little infrastructure, inadequate services and few opportunities. As a result, migration is common: every rural villager has relatives in town, and most townspeople still call a rural village 'home'. This paper begins by asking what happens when cell phones enter this equation.

Until 2007, cell phones were restricted to the "big shots" of urban PNG: politicians, bureaucrats, and wealthy businesspeople. With changes in the telecommunications market in 2007, cell phone coverage was rapidly extended to rural areas, and today over 40% of PNG's population owns handsets. The single most dramatic expansion took place in 2011, with the construction of 60 towers to provide network access for the scattered population of Western Province. This has been particularly important for landlocked communities in the mountainous interior, where access is only on foot or by light aircraft. These are the areas local people call *Las Ples* ("The Last Place"). Following networks of personal relationships along migration pathways between towns and remote villages, I examine the ways in which cell phone use and strategies of connection at a distance play an increasing role in the lives of the region's people.

**4:00pm**

**Thursday October 2**

**SSC 5220**

*Please join us beforehand for refreshments at 3:30pm*

*in SSC 5230*