



**University of  
Zurich<sup>UZH</sup>**

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**Appropriation of Assistive Technology for  
People with Mobility Disabilities in Kampala  
along an Itinerary of Socio-Technical  
Transformations**

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## **Abstract**

In Kampala, the capital of Uganda, a broad variety of assistive technologies for people with mobility disabilities, such as wheelchairs, crutches, prostheses or orthoses, can be encountered. Most of these devices differ substantially, in their appearance, the processed materials or their functionality from assistive technologies, as they are known in Europe, for example. This is surprising because these technologies have been arriving in Uganda, physically and as concepts (regarding design and use), from industrial nations for many decades and in large quantities. Hence, it has to be assumed that there are local processes at work that change assistive technologies in their materiality and meaning.

In this master's thesis, such socio-technical transformations are understood as parts of a cultural appropriation process. To describe this process, appropriation strategies of different actors are analyzed – of people with mobility disabilities who imagine, learn or engage in the use of such devices, and of experts who professionally work with assistive technologies, in production, modification, sale and distribution. According to the assumption of this thesis, all actors individually appropriate assistive technologies intellectually, conceptually, materially, economically, religiously, bodily, emotionally, semantically or practically. Their practices are purposeful and focus on the crafting of a good life. The web of such individual actions and transformations (theoretically framed by the itinerary of things concept of Hahn and Weiss), on which assistive technologies shift between different actors and settings, is interpreted as a supra-individual process of cultural appropriation of a set of technologies emanating from industrial nations into the Ugandan context. This process explains the fact that imported devices and local products (come to) look, are made and used differently. Assistive technologies, as the findings of this research suggest, can only effect positive change in the lives of individuals, their mobility, social status, health or wealth, and society, e.g. regarding the perception of disability, after they underwent this process, were transformed and re-categorized – thus locally appropriated.

This master's thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in and around Kampala during three months in 2013.

## **Preface**

How do people with mobility disabilities become competent users of their assistive technologies? This was the nagging question that remained open after the research for my bachelor's degree on the peculiarities of the use of mobility devices in Kampala.

Having had the chance to continue working in and with the Disability & Technology research group, gave me the opportunity and motivation to pursue the quest for an answer to this question. Being inspired and having received generous support of the team, I am grateful to my fellow students and supervisors, particularly to the project coordinator M.A. Gitte Beckmann, and my supervisor Prof. Dr. Mareile Flitsch for their support during all stages of this research. The main benefactors of this thesis, however, are the participants of this study in Kampala, who so nobly dedicated their time, shared their stories and expressed confidence in my work.

Raphael Schwere, Zurich June 9<sup>th</sup> 2015

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