Surfing Conversations
The development of a methodological approach to the
Internet as practice

Mads Dupont Breddam & Astrid Pernille Jespersen

ABSTRACT
In this article, we describe the development of two ethnographic research methods — the ethnologic Design Game and the Surfing Conversation — with an emphasis on the latter. These methods are considered to be reflexive approaches that engage users in innovation processes, and they are a part of the concept of practice-oriented innovation that investigates the dynamics of practices. This concept has been developed from user-driven innovation, a description of how to apply cultural analysis in investigations of Internet practice.

Key words
Surfing Conversation, ethnologic Design Games, virtual and corporeal spaces, everyday practices, cultural analysis, user-driven innovation, reflexive methods, and practice-oriented design and innovation.

INTRODUCTION
This article discusses the practical challenges, experiences and theoretical reflections that have inspired us and our fellow colleagues at Center for Cultural Analysis (CKA) to develop a new method of ethnographic research — the "Surfing Conversation." The starting point for our work and for this article was a specific project called “The interactive grocery shopping of the future." In the first part of this article, we will describe this project and its goals in some detail. As will become clear, the approach of this project was "user-driven," meaning that its aim was to develop new Internet-based solutions and business concepts through close interaction with and investigation of users. In the next part of the paper, we will describe several initial reflections on practice and innovation, including how these were applied in the development of user-driven innovation to practice-oriented innovation. The first reflexive method outlined in the investigation of user practices is the "ethnologic Design Game." Next, we will describe some further theoretical reflections (i.e., Marc Auge's theory of non-places) on the nature of Internet practice, which eventually led CKA to develop the method called the Surfing Conversation. In the conclusion, we outline the possible benefits of this practice-oriented approach, and indicate some directions for further development.

The fieldwork examples we provide were part of a project called “The interactive grocery shopping of the future." The project was a collaboration between CKA, Art of Crime, COOP-NETTORVET and Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, and it was financially supported by the Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority’s program for user-driven innovation. The main purpose of the project was twofold: to develop business models for future grocery shopping in the virtual world of the Internet, and to develop new methods of user-driven innovation.

CKA’s central contribution to the project was to gather knowledge on everyday grocery-shopping practices. In “The interactive grocery shopping of the future," CKA used a wide range of traditional ethnographic methods — such as qualitative interviews, participant observation, photography, video, etc. — to gather extensive empirical knowledge about conventional grocery-shopping practices. In the course of this research, CKA developed new reflexive methods to investigate practices in virtual on-line spaces, and these methods are the main subject of this article.

This article will follow a two-step argument regarding two methodological inquiries. First, we questioned whether interactive grocery shopping will transform grocery shopping from a conventional in-store experience to a virtual on-line practice. The primary goal of grocery shopping will remain the same: to buy groceries. However, it may be that this will be achieved through different itineraries. Because of this question, CKA investigated

1 This article is based on the ethnologic part of the project conducted by the authors together with Michael Christian Andersen, Julie Bønnelycke and Tine Damsholt at Center for Cultural Analysis. The report can be obtained at: http://centerforkulturalanalyse.ku.dk
2 http://www.deaca.dk/userdriveninnovation
existing shopping practices using a practice-oriented approach, and it was this idea that helped to develop the method of the ethnologic Design Game.

The second question was whether virtual grocery shopping will generate new practices. We determined that the Internet should not simply be considered technology, but should be seen as a separate yet connected entity that was entangled into the practice of grocery shopping. From this, CKA developed the Surfing Conversation as a method that could be used to investigate Internet practice because it also considered significant off-line entities — for example, what a user preferred to cook for dinner. As methods, the ethnologic Design Game investigated practices of conventional grocery shopping, and the Surfing Conversation incorporated this knowledge into the overall process of the interactive grocery shopping of the future.

FROM USER-DRIVEN INNOVATION TO PRACTICE-ORIENTED INNOVATION

In the following section, we will discuss how CKA addressed these questions. The departure point was user-driven innovation, but this was developed into the specific approach of practice-oriented innovation. In the field of contemporary cultural analysis, the term user-driven innovation has been used to identify a wide range of approaches that are believed to be somehow more faithful to what the users "really" want from technology and product innovation. CKA does not contend to hold a position on user-driven innovation. However, CKA does claim to have the ability to gain important knowledge from users through the use of ethnographic methods. In the grocery-shopping project, this was accomplished by developing empirically specific and user-reflexive methods. As a project assigned to CKA, the investigation also needed to deliver a certain kind of results. Because of this, CKA could not engage in an ideal type of user-driven innovation, where the users conduct the entire innovative process. Additionally, we do not think that "democratizing innovation" (von Hippel 2005) through a user-driven approach is an obvious benefit to the process — this demands that every single product should be specifically designed for each user, or that the final product is a "democratized" product, which actually does not fit anyone. Instead, CKA has developed methods that involve the user in a reflexive process — meaning that the users participate in the fieldwork by deciding what to talk about and where, while remaining in the setting of grocery shopping. This is a practice-oriented approach. Instead of focusing on the users, the product or the relationship between them, CKA analyzes the practices that the product should be designed to engage in, as well as the process of transforming these practices (Shove et al. 2007).

In "The Design of Everyday Life," the authors (Shove et al. 2007) present practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance as key concepts of practice-oriented design (Shove et al. 2007:148). The practice-as-entity is the specific action of doing something — it is "a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" (Shove et al. 2007:13). The practice-as-performance is the "active process of doing through which the practice-as-entity is sustained, reproduced and potentially changed" (Shove et al. 2007:13). Hence, the entity and performance is co-constitutive and should not be viewed as two separate and distinct sorts of practice. The practice-oriented approach "centres not on objects, and not on users and consumers, but on the more encompassing dynamics of practice" (Shove et al. 2007:134). As such, the focus is on doings: The practice or performance as an assemblage of a wide range of elements that cause a user to do something, and thereby constitute the specific entity. Changing elements in the performance can cause changes in the entity. A user-driven innovative approach may be fruitful in producing products for a certain practice. However, the performance will be changed when bringing a new product to the users. Conversely, a practice-oriented approach investigates the practices in which a product is supposed to engage users, and hence transform the practices.

In the case of grocery shopping, a lot of people are doing almost the same thing: going to a store to buy groceries. This is the entity, but the performance can take many different configurations. Fieldwork conducted with Beth and Amanda exemplifies the difference in performance. Beth is retired from work and goes to the grocery store to meet other people, and not only to buy groceries: "There can be days where I don’t see other people than those over there [in the grocery store]. I think it’s nice to come over here, and get a chat." Compared to Amanda, who is a working mother and whose daughter’s swimming lessons on Fridays are an important part in the performance of which groceries to buy, when they should be consumed, etc.: “On Fridays, our daughter has swimming lessons, so we have to eat quite early. Friday is a day when everything just has to be easy.” Both Beth and Amanda do grocery shopping, but for quite different reasons. Their practices are an assemblage of very different elements into a similar entity, but with different performances.

The approach of practice-oriented product design engages these concepts by investigating the practices that a product is supposed to fit into — both as entity and performance. It is not only which use the product enables or which opportunities it offers. A new product will change practice, or even cause new kinds of practice. In the case of Beth, grocery shopping solely on the Internet would prevent the practice she wanted from

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1 von Hippel uses the term ‘user-centred innovation.’

4 Shove et al. cites this quotation from professor of philosophy, Theodore R. Schatzki.
the conventional grocery shopping experience, which is to buy groceries and also to meet other people at the store. In the case of Amanda, Internet grocery shopping could possibly help her perform this everyday practice more easily because practices other than the entity of grocery shopping are also significant to her. Because of this, it is important to look beyond the practice-as-entity. If the practice of grocery shopping is going to be transformed by a transition to virtual grocery shopping, then it is important to pay attention to both the existing practice and the elements that are going to be transformed.

In the following section, we describe the ethnologic Design Game that was used to investigate the practice of grocery shopping as performance. The knowledge gained was used to formulate the analysis of the opportunities available from future grocery shopping on the Internet. This is why we speak of practice-oriented innovation.

**ETHNOLOGIC DESIGN GAME**

The method of ethnologic Design Game was developed and inspired by the methodological development of participatory design at The Danish Design School (DKDS) (see, for example: Brandt 2006; and Binder, Brandt and Gregory 2008). However, the concept of Design Game from DKDS was further developed by CKA into a specific method — the *ethnologic Design Game* — that could be used to gather empirical knowledge about the practice of grocery shopping.

When the ethnologic Design Game was developed, the main insight from the preliminary analysis of the empirical knowledge was that grocery shopping is a continuous negotiation between different preferences. Users did not only choose groceries because they were, for example, cheap, healthy or light. Instead, preferences such as these were among the other elements that were continuously negotiated and assembled in the practice of grocery shopping. Therefore, it was important to develop the ethnologic Design Game in a way that the users could not avoid describing their practice of grocery shopping. This challenge was met by constructing a game that consisted of seven categories of bricks — there were between three and ten bricks in each category. The entire game was constructed around the elements that were extracted from the empirical material, from planning grocery shopping to finishing a meal. Some categories were, for example, “shops” (where the bricks were a variety...
of different conventional Danish grocery stores, such as Netto or Irma) and “cooking” (bricks that described who was doing the cooking, using a recipe, etc.). The game also contained three “joker-bricks,” which the participants could use as they felt appropriate, especially if none of the other bricks corresponded to what they thought was the most accurate. Each category was printed on different colored pieces of cardboard and laminated, which made them easy to distinguish and handle. By the end of each game, the user (or users) had produced a visual representation of their practice of grocery shopping. This would accompany a digital sound-recording of the game, and would also become good visual material in presentations to the project partners (see example below).

The process of playing the Design Game was conducted by an ethnologist and at least one user as a player. The ethnologist provided a brief overview, explaining that the game was about collecting the bricks that were central to the user’s practice of buying and consuming groceries. He then presented the first category to the player, asked her to collect the bricks and explain why she chose as she did. When the Design Game was played with two players — often a couple or people who knew each other — the game was exceptionally productive. One player might explain her choice of bricks, while the other player might comment on these choices and explanations. This initiated very interesting — and sometimes almost defensive/offensive — discussions between the two players. Sometimes, it prompted the players to re-choose and re-arrange their bricks and arguments.

When Daniel chose the bricks of “organic” and “animal welfare” as important elements in his practice of grocery shopping, he commented that the two bricks actually could not be combined. This provoked his wife Mary into demanding an explanation:

Daniel: “But they can also be opposite. If you’re completely fanatic, then ‘organic’ and ‘animal welfare’ cannot be combined.”

Mary: “Think a little about that. [Pause] Then explain what you mean by that!”

Daniel: “It was meant in such a way…It’s because organic products have to be cultivated — if you’re all into such a hunter-gatherer thing, then you would say, ‘If you keep animals in captivity, then you already have disregarded animal welfare completely’.”

The bricks for “organic” and “animal welfare” were often seen in combination, though. Playing with Daniel and Mary, the game explained that “organic” and “animal welfare” were important elements in their practice, but also that they were not completely obvious as benefits.

The ethnologic Design Game placed itself in relation to the ethnologist, who wanted a certain kind of knowledge, and the user, who was able to give it. The game provided a setting in which the user could unfold and explain the practice of grocery shopping, without flying off on a tangent. The Design Game enabled the user to unravel the comprehensive and heterogeneous practice that is everyday grocery shopping. This could be constituted of elements, such as a preference for different products, discourses on health or climate, logistical aspects like having a car or not — among others. These are all elements that constitute the everyday practice of grocery shopping as a complex socio-material practice, and the method of the ethnologic Design Game is useful to investigate this practice.

The method of the ethnologic Design Game expanded the boundaries of what was possible in uncovering extensive knowledge about everyday practices. But it also highlighted the complexities shown by the approach of practice-oriented innovation on everyday practice. And this was even before the virtual spaces were taken into consideration. CKA wished to use the preliminary analysis from the traditional fieldwork and the ethnologic Design Game to gain better knowledge about Internet practice, especially concerning grocery shopping. The knowledge collected earlier stressed that practices were not only entities but also performances — and these have a wide range of different configurations. By accounting for the virtual element in the analysis, the methodological concept of the Surfing Conversation was developed. As a method for gathering knowledge about Internet practice, it acknowledges practice both as an entity and as performance.

GAP BETWEEN VIRTUAL AND CORPOREAL SPACES

There is a tendency to see the virtual (on-line) and corporeal (physical) as something distinct and separate. The common notions of on-line or off-line are the most obvious examples of this distinction — either you are on or you are off. There have been a range of good attempts to conceptualize this methodologically, one of which briefly follows.

Anthropologist Charlotte Aull Davies’ broad methodological approaches in “ Reflexive Ethnography” acknowledge the Internet as a field in its own right, and also that it is used in a non-virtual space. When the ethnographer wants to explore Internet practice, this gives rise to a methodological dilemma: the ethnographer seemingly has to be in two places at once. Because of this, “[t]he only way ethnographers can fully experience this is during their own on-line activities, when they are aware of the simultaneity of on-line and off-line engagement and can observe activities at this interface” (Aull Davies 2008 [1998]:165-166). Even though acknowledging that Internet practice is not only found in the virtual spaces, it seems almost impossible to get a grip on the simultaneity of on-line and off-line practice, other than the ethnographer’s own experience. Instead, Aull Davies provides a range of
methodological recommendations on how to investigate the use of the Internet on the Internet, while remaining aware that there is also a context to it. With "reflexive ethnography," Aull Davies investigates on-line practices as entities found solely on the Internet. In this way, Aull Davies reproduces the gap between on-line and off-line, or the gap between virtual and corporeal spaces. The methodological problems of separating Internet practice from other everyday practice are dismissed into a "context awareness." Rather than accept Aull Davies' dismissal of the problem, CKA wanted to engage in and develop methods to analyze a certain sort of practice in everyday life — grocery shopping. These methods would account for the entangled character of virtual and corporeal spaces, which we will elaborate on in the following section.1

SPACE, PLACE AND NON-PLACE

When analyzing the virtual spaces of grocery shopping, our approach needed one further elaboration on the theoretical framing. This was regarding the concepts of space, place and non-place. In the following section, we present an example that illustrates the entangled character of virtual and corporeal spaces. Then we present a more theoretical understanding of the concepts.

In a Surfing Conversation (on which we will elaborate extensively below), Tom was using his computer to shop on the Internet for a certain meal at an existent Danish grocery store. He started to describe how he only navigates by the pictures and not the text, and then his daughter breaks into the conversation and asks what we are doing. Tom explains the project briefly, and then continues to solve a problem he has encountered.

Tom: “I believe there are pictures of everything the text describes, so I’m not reading that. But you can make it [the meal] without bacon, and usually we have bacon in the freezer so I pass it this time. Then I need something... That was the meat, now I’m getting some pasta.”

Marie (daughter): “What are you doing?”

Tom: “It’s something about buying food on the Internet. But I think we are just going to finish it, but I can tell you about it later, Marie. This I do not understand…”

This example shows a wide range of entangled aspects concerning virtual and corporeal spaces. Tom cannot find bacon on the virtual site, but that is not a problem because he usually has it in the freezer. His practice in the virtual space is connected to his practice around the home freezer and other conventional grocery shopping. His daughter, to whom he promises to explain the project later (in a future, corporeal space), abruptly interrupts the practice in the virtual store. Tom speaks to his daughter, and then quickly returns to the computer and the virtual space, where he cannot solve a problem. The problem was created because he only navigated through the pictures and not the text. Grocery-shopping practice on the Internet is not divided into virtual or corporeal spaces. It is a heterogeneous, socio-material and continuing construction that involves the freezer, which contains bacon, as well as promises of further explanation practice in a vision of a future space, the arrangement of the virtual store, etc.

With influence from philosophical scholar Michel de Certeau, anthropologist Marc Augé has distinguished between space, as the relational and practiced entity; place as the non-practiced entity; and non-place, on which we will elaborate below. Augé’s places are a configuration of elements, but also “places of identity, of relations and of history” (2006 [1995]:52). Augé’s place is, as is de Certeau’s, relational, but it also inscribes identity to its inhabitants and thereby becomes historical and with minimal stability (2006 [1995]:54). In contrast, space is a “frequentation of places” (Augé 2006 [1995]:85); or with de Certeau, space is the practiced place and “is composed of intersections of mobile elements” (de Certeau 1988 [1984]:117). De Certeau’s place can be represented on a map, while Augé’s place can only be partially represented this way, because the map should not include any historical and identifying characters of the place. Augé then introduces the notion of non-place: When the place without identity, relations or history can be practiced into a space, we have the non-place.4 This could be, for example, places of transit like the airport or the highway (Augé 2006 [1995]:75-115).

The non-place is interesting in relation to virtual spaces — the practice of the virtual place, which transforms it to a virtual space, can (due to technological opportunities of multi-platform Internet use) partly be practiced in a non-place. For example, it is easy to imagine grocery shopping on a netbook or laptop while on the train going home from work, and thereby utilizing time that otherwise not would have been applicable. It is not, however, certain that users want to utilize that time — we will explore this later in the article.

The difference between the practiced spaces and non-practiced places can shed light on the difficulties regarding the investigation of Internet practice. The Internet practice can be considered as something that occurs in a double space. It is simultaneously practiced...
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The practice is constituted in both these spaces, and as such the gap between virtual and corporeal is inadequate. From addressing this as a methodological question, CKA developed the method of the Surfing Conversation.

SURFING CONVERSATION

The Surfing Conversation was developed as a method that went beyond the dichotomous understanding of virtual and corporeal spaces and produced empirical knowledge concerning practices that occurred simultaneously on and off the Internet. This was especially important because one of the main goals of the project was to create a business model for the interactive grocery shopping of the future.

During a Surfing Conversation, the user and the ethnologist were physically sitting next to each other in front of a computer with Internet access. The ethnologist started with a presentation of what the user was supposed to do, which was to go grocery shopping for a meal of the user's own choice on a specific Danish virtual grocery store. The user was instructed to "think aloud" — that is, to explain what he was doing, such as "Now I'm clicking on the picture of minced meat." The Surfing Conversation should provide the setting of both a virtual and corporeal space in which the user presents his reflections while using the interactive grocery store. If the user forgot to explain what he was doing, the ethnologist would ask a question like, "What are you doing now?" — not to lead the answers, but to prompt the user to explain aloud. In this way, the Surfing Conversation got the user to solve a particular challenge and provide information about the practice of grocery shopping on the Internet. This was done through a user-reflexive process, where the user was asked to solve a problem in a way that would make the solution compatible with his everyday practice. By doing so, the Surfing Conversation gathered empirical knowledge on Internet practice — both as entity and performance, and also as a part of the more general

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Footnote: The Surfing Conversation was developed with inspiration from anthropologists Tim Ingold and Jo Lee's concept of "walk and talk" (2006) and also ethnologist Marie Sandberg's critique of the phenomenological features of Ingold and Lee's concept, which further developed into "Walking Conversations" (2009).

Further elaborating on the quote from Tom and his daughter Marie (cited above): It shows that Internet practice is not something contained in an exclusive virtual space. The practice-as-entity may be oscillating between a virtual and corporeal space, but the performance is constituted of elements found on the Internet and in the home (where the computer is located). However, it is also constituted by relations between what both the virtual and conventional grocery shop offers or not — and what the freezer probably contains. The performance is constituted through a series of elements: the freezer, daughter, ethnologist, computer, etc. And in the case of grocery shopping on the Internet, Tom’s practice goes even further when involving a product (bacon) that was purchased in a conventional store — then the entire practice concerning conventional grocery shopping is brought into play in connection to the Internet practice.

Although technology makes it possible to conduct virtual grocery shopping almost anywhere, it also needs to be considered whether users actually want this opportunity. The computer can be used in relation to a wide range of other material elements. These could be, for example: the type and physical placement of the computer (bedroom, office, living room, portable laptop or netbook, mobile phone, etc.), the extent of the computer’s interconnectivity with other technological elements (printer, digital camera, the computer at work, etc.), whether the computer is considered a desirable object or something that should be hidden — or thrown — away. If future grocery shopping is going to be conducted in a non-place, it is a technical requirement that there is access to the Internet in these non-places. However, it also needs to be taken into consideration whether users actually want to utilize this time with the computer. Sometimes being away from the computer is felt to be a preferred freedom — sometimes it isn’t. New technological opportunities are not necessarily good for everyone, and therefore one cannot expect users to do everything on the computer. Samantha, a working mother, is an example of someone who would prefer not to use the computer, but is sometimes forced to anyway: “I should use it [the computer] more... The girls’ school gives information here. We should sit down every day...it’s something that takes five minutes. But I don’t — and it’s something that only takes a short time”.

As a result of this, it is important that throughout the Surfing Conversation, the ethnologist carefully observes the use of the computer and the Internet. But it is equally important that he observes what is going on around the computer, especially elements that may exert an influence on the computer practice. This could be, for example, children’s play, the placement of the computer, kind of computer, etc. All sorts of unexpected elements can potentially influence, promote or prevent Internet practice. It also shows that even if a user could conduct virtual grocery shopping everywhere at any time, it is not certain that the user actually wants this — it is more certain that some users do not want this opportunity.

Throughout a Surfing Conversation, the user was reflexive with regard to the innovative process. The user was able, as with the ethnologic Design Game, to decide how to solve the challenge that was defined by the ethnologist. Put in general terms of practice-oriented innovation, both the ethnologic Design Game and the Surfing Conversation placed the practice-as-entity of grocery shopping with the user into a setting that combined certain elements. The ethnologic Design Game used a wide range of elements and produced an image of the user’s grocery-shopping practice. The Surfing Conversation used a challenge and elements such as the meal, the physical setting, the specific virtual grocery store, etc. With both methods, all the elements could be combined and transformed by the user as she preferred, which then represented the practice-as-performance of daily grocery shopping and Internet use. In this way, both methods presented a particular setting that was tied to a specific task, but one that was not fixed because each user could change and shape it to make it fit the requirements of her practice. The ethnologic Design Game investigated the practices that were to be transformed by a transition to virtual grocery shopping. The Surfing Conversation investigated Internet practice as a performance that was constituted of simultaneously on-line and off-line elements, and the relations between them.

Summarizing the Surfing Conversation as a method includes elements of both the traditional qualitative interview and participant observation. These are combined with the more theoretical insights surrounding virtual and corporeal spaces and places, practice-oriented innovation and the preliminary analysis. In this way, the reflexive method of the Surfing Conversation transcends what Aull Davies presented simply as a context that the ethnologist needed to be aware of. Perhaps a Surfing Conversation could have been conducted without the earlier ethnologic Design Game. However, the ethnologic Design Game was important in the methodological development because it showed the immense complexities of grocery shopping. Without the knowledge of conventional grocery shopping provided by the ethnologic Design Game, we do not believe that the Surfing Conversation would have been nearly as effective in understanding the empirical knowledge that was produced.

**CONCLUSION**

In this article, we have described the concept of practice-oriented innovation and the development of two reflexive methods, the ethnologic Design Game
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and the Surfing Conversation. Understanding practice-oriented innovation provided a framework for how to investigate existing practices that may be transformed by a transition from conventional to virtual grocery shopping. And the development of the ethnologic Design Game and the Surfing Conversation provided methods to better investigate “virtual practices.” The idea of a separate Internet sphere was dismantled to focus attention on practice-as-performance, which is constituted of a wide range of different elements, and is performed in different spaces simultaneously with regard to Internet practice.

The two reflexive methods were developed through a dynamic process of gathering empirical knowledge and doing preliminary analysis, which required progressive theoretical growth. In this way, the reflexive methods were in an ongoing process of development, always adapting to the specific empirical field. With regards to interactive grocery shopping of the future, the ethnologic Design Game and the Surfing Conversation were empirically sensitive methods that resulted from that process. These methods can probably be adjusted and applied to other analytical fields of study, or other methods might be developed through an approach using practice-oriented innovation with inspiration from CKA’s work.

The advantage of practice-oriented product innovation is that it pays attention to the user, and is therefore somewhat user-driven, but it also acknowledges the transformational potential in bringing a new product to the market. Transformations in practices can be difficult to get a hold of, but they are important to pay attention to. The empirical examples discussed in this article all show that the practice of grocery shopping is a performance that is assembled from many different elements. Reflexive methods and practice-oriented innovation provides an opportunity to conduct cultural analysis in processes of innovation. The ethnologic Design Game and the Surfing Conversation are methods that provided specific answers to practice-based questions regarding the interactive grocery shopping of the future.
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FÖRFATTARE
Mads Dupont Breddam is graduate student at the Ethnology section, University of Copenhagen.
Astrid Pernille Jespersen is assistant professor at the Ethnology section, University of Copenhagen.