Chapter 6

Africa connects: Mobile communication and social change in the margins of African society. The example of the Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon

Mirjam De Bruijn[1]
African Studies Centre, Leiden University
bruijnm@ascleiden.nl

Abstract

The past decade mobile phone technology has spread rapidly into remote areas of Africa. These areas are often depicted as being marginal, marginality related to geography, economy and politics. The people inhabiting these areas also define themselves as marginal vis-à-vis the state, the dominant others. Although the label marginal suggest disconnection, the people inhabiting these areas have on the contrary always been part and parcel of patterns of mobility. Relatives and family of the people from these areas migrated to other marginal areas like the urban slums, or as labourers to petrol rich areas, plantations etc., and after independence increasingly to the other side of the ocean, Europe and the States, in search for a better livelihood for themselves and their relatives. Communication within these mobile margins has become easier with the advent of communication technology, like the mobile phone. The question in this presentation is how the connections through mobile technology, i.e. mobile communication will (re)shape the mobile margins (and vice versa). Discussed are the first results of a research programme that started in 2008, and includes case studies in Mali, Chad, Cameroon, Angola and Sudan. Examples from these case study areas highlight the question if and how the mobile margins are shaped around mobile communication and how ideas and perceptions about marginality are transformed.

Keywords: mobility, mobile technology, Africa, marginality

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Introduction

Wireless technology has reached the remote areas in Africa over the last decade. Its spread has been rapid and expectations regarding its development potential, also at the everyday level, are high. However the first publications are now appearing and have started to question the development hype surrounding mobile telephony and ICT in general (Osama 2006, Donner 2008, and for earlier work about the Internet and development, Cheneau Locquay, 2004). It is not yet known what mobile telephony means for development and social change. Wireless technology is new and social and economic changes are being noticed. The first studies to appear, which have been reviewed by Donner (2008), show that little is known about the effects and influence of mobile telephony in the rural areas in Africa. To see if there are new social dynamics at play, it is essential to situate the social and cultural landscape into which this technology is arriving. Insights into the relationship between technology and society have shown the mutual shaping of technology and society. Individuals, and thus society, have their own ways of appropriating the technology and of relating it and the new possibilities it opens up to past experiences and future expectations. In this article I am interested in how this new communication technology is shaping and changing everyday lives in “remote” Africa. The approach of Horst and Miller (2006) and De Bruijn et al. (2009) that puts the social appropriation of technology as central informs the analytical framework in this paper. Technology shapes society as much as society shapes technology. This is a process that cannot be dissociated from its cultural and social context and the context of communication as well. The appropriation of the mobile phone has to be understood within this context, which I depict as “communication ecology”.

The study area for this research, namely the Grassfields in Cameroon, is a marginal and remote area as far as infrastructure, economic development and geographical location are concerned. This has led many to move out of the region and it has a long

history of mobility from pre-colonial times through the colonial period and into the post-independence era. The everyday lives of many Cameroonians in this area are coloured by mobility and the introduction of the new communication technology could be expected to be present in patterns of mobility and in the interpretation of this mobility. The dynamic interplay between communication, marginality and mobility is first and foremost visible in people's daily lives. I have therefore adopted a qualitative approach that allows insight into family histories and personal stories and the social dynamics at play.[2] With the gathering of family histories comes access to family archives, like photographs and sometimes written documents too. This article concentrates on the stories of two families in the Grassfields of Cameroon that are from different ethnic and historical backgrounds.[3] The article starts with an overview of the communication landscape in this part of Cameroon and then goes into the family histories. These observations and reconstructions of life histories are also the basis for an attempt to define a model to analyze the social dynamics we are interested in here.

The landscape of communication: Migration and mobility in the Grassfields of Bamenda region

This mountainous area used to be an area of refuge for people fleeing wars between the big empires in the Sahel-Sudan zone in the 18th and 19th centuries as it was an area where kingdoms were vested. People settled in the valleys but only after they had been itinerant for a long time. These kingdoms (*fondoms*) are notorious for their wars and multiple displacements and the mountains offered protection. Under German rule, which lasted from 1884-1914, plantation complexes were developed in the southern coastal part of the area and transport developed but only very slowly and with roads best suited to wagon-drawn carts. After World War I, the British took over and administered the region as part of the Eastern provinces of Nigeria. English became the *lingua franca*, which explains why the region today, including Bamenda, is known

[2] Here I refer to the larger programme of which this study in Cameroon is a part:"Mobile Africa Revisited" which is funded by NWO-WOTRO, the Netherlands. See also: www.mobileafricarevisted.wordpress.com.
[3] Both families have given their consent to their archives and stories being used for research purposes.

as Anglophone Cameroon. The British started construction of trunk-line telephone connections but the system never became a communication tool for the local population and remained a means for communication for the colonial elite. The first trunk-line telephone arrived in Bamenda in 1949 (Gam Nkwi, 2009). During the colonial period, schools and missionary posts were established in the area and it continued to be an important corridor for trade relations. Under British colonial rule, the local kingdoms grew stronger as a result of the power given to them under the system of indirect rule.

Slave trading and refuge were the reasons for people's movements in the pre-colonial period but movement was a part of daily life too with cultivation practices in this area being itinerant as well. The chiefdoms controlled this mobility by controlling the land but also by sending slaves out into slave trade and incorporating them in their own societies as well. Later during colonial times when the plantation economy was established, the flow of people was regulated by the demands of the colonizers. The plantation economy turned the Grassfields into a labour reservoir.

The plantations were just one of the directions people followed during the colonial era. The other was over the Nigerian border where trade relations and other exchanges continued and maybe even intensified. The introduction of "modern" cars and improved roads facilitated the mobility of the happy few, and later bus transport became available to ordinary citizens too. Drivers became the new messengers in the region by taking messages between plantation areas, towns and the Grassfields. During colonial times, Fulani nomadic herders came into the area in search of better pastures and to escape the wars and conflicts in Northern Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad.[4] The local kings allowed them to live in the Grassfields and the colonial regime did not impose restrictions on mobility. Animal husbandry developed in this period: the Fulani became semi-sedentary and a transhumance system began in the hills. They established their

[4] Bamenda Annual Report to the League of Nations, 1939, National Archives, Buea.

own chiefdom in Sabga, a small village close to Bamenda, and the kings became the owners of large numbers of cattle, with the Fulani as their herdsmen. Cattle-trading routes developed between Nigeria and Cameroon under the control and guidance of the colonial administrators. The colonial economy itself was thus responsible for introducing and facilitating new mobilities.

At independence in 1960/61, Anglophone Cameroon joined French Cameroon and broke away from Nigeria. However this did not end the movement of people between the two regions though the border became a reality in terms of tax and customs during the Mandate and Trusteeship period. Communities and families were divided and the division between the two countries still has political ramifications (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 2003). Families from the Bamenda area have connections with the plantations and Northern and Eastern Nigeria too. The different areas are part of the life-worlds of the people in various geographies.

In the post-independent period, the unification of Anglophone Cameroon with Francophone Cameroon introduced another politics to the region as a result of the region's continuous marginalization in terms of equity and access to the national cake. The situation was exacerbated in the mid-1980s and reached a climax in 1990 with the formation of the country's first opposition party since 1966 (Krieger, 1998). The separatist movement led to political unrest in the area. The Francophone government reacted by using repression which in turn fed the area's image of marginalization. Today, Anglophones in Cameroon feel politically marginalized and oppressed. This neglect is visible in the region's infrastructure. The literature on the situation is extensive but for this study it is important to realize that sentiments of marginalization are deeply felt by the people in the area. This unity of protest and rebellion is countervailed by the hierarchies that organize the internal structure of the Grassfields societies.

The mobility of people from the Grassfields extended into other parts of the world, especially the US and Europe, for political and economic reasons, particularly in the 1990s as a result of the economic crisis in Cameroon. The US immigration policy, with its Green Card lottery system, has encouraged many people to migrate overseas. This seems a natural step for Grassfielders and is viewed as a continuation of past patterns of mobility. The term “Bushfaller” is a bush metaphor which sums up these migrants very well as they are people who go out hunting and come back with game. However, in many cases the game is not as rich as they might have hoped (Nyamnjoh, fc). This itinerary may also be explained as a new phase in the area’s mobile culture and one that is facilitated by new means of transport and new ways to communicate with those far away.

After independence, the Fulani, who had never participated in the western educational system, were not at the forefront of changes in mobility patterns. They only gradually moved to the cities and developed different lifestyles. With demographic changes and a reorientation of lifestyles, the Fulani have increasingly opted for a sedentary lifestyle. Many young men are engaged in trade in the capital and other larger cities, and have developed linkages there. They also engage in driving large trucks and taxis (cf. Keja, 2009; Pelikana, 2007).

Cameroonians today are known for their mobility and migration. There is a large diaspora community in, for instance, Washington DC. The phenomenon of “bushfalling” has gained huge proportions and has now also permeated the Fulani lifestyle (Pelikana, fc). The Grassfields are characterized by a culture of migration (Hahn and Klute, 2007; De Bruijn, 2007) in which movement is part of people’s lifestyles. This mobility can be partly explained by interpretations of marginality but they fit into a hierarchical structure in which mobility is governed as well. This culture of mobility is also linked to the geographical location of the area and its economic consequences.

This history of the culture of migration in the Grassfields comes clearly to the fore in interviews with older people in the area, who indicated that communication with those far away was part of their daily activities. We should however notice that “far away” has taken on a new dimension. What “far” used to mean in the past was going from the rural areas to Bamenda but today “far” is the distance between this area and the US. Keeping in touch with those far away was always a necessity, though not always possible. Communication is clearly part of this culture of migration and different communication systems were involved. Long before the Western form of letter writing was introduced, people communicated with indigenous letter writing, for instance using grass to send messages or the famous talking drums. Later letter writing became common among the educated, mainly those who had attended Catholic mission schools. Letters were kept in the house in a special place, for example above the main entrance to the house, and were sent through the post office but also with drivers. Today people still have these archives of letters and are proud of them. Communicating with those far away was not only important for the information it brought but also to show that one had relatives abroad. It went together with the development of the post office, that as we will see later merged with the national telephone provider, i.e. the birth of CAMTEL (Cameroonian Telecompany) in Cameroon (cf. Nyamnjoh, 2005a).

The Fulani are an interesting case in the culture of migration. They have a mobile lifestyle linked to the very core of their economy, namely cattle, that can be traced back to past generations. The history of travel is central in their family histories as it was at the heart of their cattle economy. Every family can trace their roots back to relatives in Nigeria, Northern Cameroon or Chad (cf. De Bruijn, 2007). Their communication was travelling, though in many cases contacts were lost with family members far away. The Fulani define their communities through a line of people, the possession of wealth that is on the move. Their culture is a good example of one that has internalized mobility.

They did not engage in the same patterns of plantation labour, letter writing and schooling as the other groups in the Bamenda Grassfields but after independence have gradually hooked up to these patterns as well. This hooking-up came with a change in their lifestyle in that they lost their cattle to drought and became increasingly attracted by the modern lifestyle (cf. Keja, 2009). Their pattern of movement seems to have pushed them to take on work that has to do with mobility, such as driving. Former links with Nigeria have not been broken. On the contrary, many Fulani men who left cattle herding in Cameroon have moved to Nigeria to places where they had family to do odd jobs or work as drivers. The histories of families we spoke to show how these links are still very visible.

A recent development in the communication landscape/ecology is the mobile phone. It was introduced in Bamenda at the end of the 1990s and today Orange and MTN define the region's phone landscape. Recently CAMTEL, the national phone company, re-entered the market, which is still growing as demonstrated by the opening of a large MTN office in Bamenda town in January 2009. On one of our first visits to Bamenda town in 2006, we were struck by the omnipresence of yellow in the town. MTN campaigns had clearly coloured the town yellow. The first phone cards were very expensive but prices soon dropped and one of the company's strategies has been to allow access to people who are among the poorest in society. They have been very successful and today it is possible to get a transfer of airtime for FCFA 200 so that you can simply "beep" another person, for instance a relative far away. The phone has made a big difference to people in the countryside who, although the network is often patchy, also use the phone frequently. It is interesting to see how people in villages have phones even though there is no electricity and network access is only available at the top of the hill or at a specific spot in the village. Many Fulani who keep their cattle in

the bush assemble at these points to call family members or get information about market prices.[5]

Communication ecology

The sketch above shows a communication landscape or ecology in which people can make choices about connecting to others or not. The technologies for communication used to vary from being mobile, i.e. travelling oneself, to sending messengers or relaying messages through transport links. And today there is the mobile phone too. These various ways of communicating have developed in a region that was politically marginalized due to poor road infrastructure and a general lack of development.

I use the concept "communication ecology" here in the way that it was used by Horst and Miller (2006) in a study into the relationship between mobile telephony and poverty in Jamaica. The concept of ecology offers an interesting line of approach to describe the relationship between human beings, society and the environment in which communication and communication technology play such an important role.[6] Inspired by Ingold (2000), I see ecology as a complex net of relations between society, individuals and the environment within and beyond the margins, a web of relations that is never in balance and where place and power are continuously being redefined and renegotiated. Communication technology adds a new element to this set of relations, adding the virtual world, the world of relations and of communicating with the range of possibilities on which people can draw to make a living. In this web of relations and communication, people are constantly looking for new ways or "pathways" of communication. Societies too can develop pathways (De Bruijn and van Dijk, 2005).[7] In these interactions, a moment of reciprocal appropriation of an individual or society and environment is enclosed. This is a culturally and socially specific process that leads to

[5] See De Bruijn and Nyamnjoh (fc) for more details on phone culture and its use in rural areas.
[6] Horst and Miller (2006) offer an ethnographic description of the relationship between communication and poverty. I use the concept 'communication ecology' as a metaphor and refer to research that is looking into the relationship between the environment and society.
[7] De Bruijn and van Dijk (2005) proposed the concept of "pathways" to indicate the way people give form to their lives in relation to the changing natural environment.

social transformation (Croll and Parkin, 1992; De Bruijn and van Dijk, 1995; De Bruijn et al., 2007). Power relations play a role in this process of interaction and appropriation, and communication technology is part of the communication ecology and also of the interactions and processes of appropriation.[8]

Communication ecology is made up of interaction between the institutes that make communication possible: the possibilities that enable communication (social relations), communication technologies (e.g. roads, cars, telephones) and the people who are part of it. Communication ecology is culturally and socially informed and will therefore differ with space and time.

As we have clearly demonstrated with the example of Cameroon, communication technology evolves: it has a history. It is not easy to predict the relations and their changes in time in a communication ecology as change is never linear or direct. Historical research into the dynamics and complexity of Africa's communication ecology can offer insight into recent developments surrounding mobile telephony and, at the same time, critically examine optimistic development ideas. After all, all media were once new media (Gitelman and Pingree, 2003).

The description of the Cameroonian communication landscape given above depicts a communication ecology where the distance between people who are related through family ties, ethnic ties or regional ties is normality. People are used to living far from each other. It is part of their history. These distanced relations are part of a society and economy where migration is part of the lifecycle. This mobility received an added impetus with the economic system under colonial rule and later under independence. It developed as well in relation to the availability of transport and other communication technologies. Even today the communication ecology of the Grassfields is still characterized by bad roads and remoteness. Technology has evolved from walking to

[8] The relationship between society and technology builds upon the existing historical forms of these relations. See for instance, Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003), Woolgar and Grint (1997), Law (1991) and Gow and Smith (2006). The relationship between society and technology builds upon the existing historical forms of these relations.

the today's mobile phone. This latter development has considerably reduced other forms of communication like letter writing. An important dynamic in this communication ecology was the introduction of western-style mission schools in the area. Education became part of the dynamics of communication ecology through writing, access to better jobs and being able to access expensive communication technologies. And with the advent of communication technology that involved wealth and the ability to access it, richer people also had access, for instance, to cars. This ecology should be understood in the context of the political marginality of the region.

People always carve out their own styles and in the following section I illustrate this with the stories of two families who are operating differently in the communication ecology of the Grassfields.

The Bikong family

Up-country Bamenda is a place where the Germans began their administration and where their old buildings still stand. Today it is still the administrative centre of the Bamenda region and where a family I got acquainted with lives in a nice house. [9] They would appear to be fairly rich and have a long history in the region. The woman owns the house as her husband, who was an important lawyer in the region, is dead. Nowadays she lives there with her two brothers and her children. The mobile network in this area is not very good and the best place to use a mobile phone is in the garden. That is where one can find the family speaking to a sister in America, a brother in England, the late husband's sister or relatives in their village who are now connected. The owner of the house is heavily involved in the social life of Bamenda and in the church where she plays a leading role. Her phone rings all the time. One of her brothers who worked in South Africa has an iPhone and receives a lot of messages. He is at the centre of the family organization and most of what he does happens on

[9] The story of this family (that remains anonymous for reasons of privacy) was collected between January 2009 and August 2009. One of the family members was part of the research team.

the phone. Their mother lives in the village but is often in their house, as is their grandmother. Their father died a few years ago. He was an important figure in the area's political life and as a civil servant, first under the colonial rulers and later in independent Cameroon. He used to be a policeman and had done part of his training at Scotland Yard.

As a civil servant in the Cameroonian state, one travels a lot because of constant transfers every few years. In his case, postings were in South West and North West Provinces. At the moment of his retirement he was based in a border post with Nigeria. Everywhere he lived, he built up networks of friends and contacts. His wife was a civil servant too and had her own postings so the children went to boarding school and had their own itinerary as well. During the holidays the family was together and was able to travel by car as their father was one of the first to have a car of his own. (It would have been bought in the 1970s.) Their holidays, always over bad roads, were full of travel to places where the father or mother worked. The family had a central position in the social life in all the places they lived, and today their acquaintances visit for big family celebrations, coming from all over the province. In those days there were no phones and people communicated by letter, although probably the main means of communication I found in the family archives were pictures they sent each other (see Illustration 6.1). Today too, the family living abroad still sends pictures to those "at home". Mobile phone communication does not seem to have changed this attitude towards communication.

While the father was working in various places, contact with the home village was kept alive as well. Being part of a real family gives one a certain obligation regarding family ties and duties, for instance he took responsibility for educating his nieces and nephews. Another obligation was in the many ritual events and after his retirement he became politically active. He did not move back immediately to the family village but lived for a few more years at the border with his wife who worked at a hospital.

Illustration 6.1. Photograph found in the archive of the Bikong family

This constructed picture shows the mobility of the family with the women in western style dress and the plane in front. The picture is not dated.

The family's children went to schools in Nigeria and Yaoundé, and some continued their studies abroad afterwards. Increasingly, this itinerary among young people became common for other village families as well. Today many of the villagers have moved to Douala for work and schooling, and others have gone to the US and Europe. The village in fact has never been confined to its geography, as these movements were preceded by movements to the plantations. Many families whose older members are now living in the village have a history of mobility varying from the plantations to that demanded by being in the civil service and for education.

After retirement, the family head became involved in politics because he was a fervent supporter of the opposition. His relations and networks had been inspired by his professional life as a civil servant. His close friends and children were convinced of his intention to free Anglophone Cameroon from the oppression it was experiencing. Today this sentiment is still to be found among his family in the diaspora and it helps to unite them. Here we should link the use of mobile phones to the Internet, as it too is

used to set up relations and the diaspora has become involved in discussions on the marginality of Anglophone Cameroon (see Brinkman et al., fc). The family head died a few years ago but the family's connections are still intact. The sons who have taken over their father's role maintain these contacts, a task that has become easier with the advances in communication technology.

A Fulani family history

Sabga is a Fulani village twenty minutes drive up in the hills to the east of Bamenda. The people who live there are no longer nomadic and their cattle are kept on farms with clearly demarcated grazing areas and leave for part of the year with herders on transhumance. These Fulani have developed an almost urban lifestyle. The families we met in Sabga all have close relatives who moved to Bamenda, Douala or Yaoundé, and are engaging in trade or other work as drivers.[10] Some families have special relations with Nigeria as they may have lived there themselves for a few years, or have relatives who did. Thus their mobile lifestyle, though no longer dictated by their animals, has led these families to being spread over a wide area.

Aisata moved to Sabga as an older woman when she got married for the second time. Her mother, in her eighties, lives in one of the farms up the hill. Aisata and her husband lived their married life in Panso in the Northern parts of the Grassfields, where the family's cattle are herded. The first time I met Aisata in Sabga in January 2007, her daughters were visiting her because of the Muslim festivities around *Tabaski*. Aisata has ten children: six daughters and four sons. The youngest is a son, Hamidou, who she clearly adores, and who is at school in Bamenda. It was not clear where the other three sons are. Her daughters do not live in Sabga. One is still near Panso with her husband and children and another one lives in Yaoundé. She has a *salon de coiffure* (hairdressers) there and is married to a man from Nkambe who works for the UN,

[10] This family story was gathered gradually between 2006 and the present. I first met the family in January 2006. The names in this case study have been changed to protect their privacy.

which is why she went to Ethiopia in June/July 2007. Aisata's second daughter Jeneba is married to a driver who works for the Jeannot transport agency and commutes between Buea and Bamenda. She lived in Nigeria for ten years with him when he was a driver there but nowadays they live in Bamenda. Another daughter lives in Nigeria and Jeneba "lent" her daughter, who goes to school in Nigeria, to her childless sister. The pictures on the wall of Aisata's house invited us to talk about her brother (Illustration 6.2). One of the pictures is a man (Aisata's brother) standing in a typical American landscape. He emigrated twenty years ago and now lives near Washington, is married to an American and has two children. His younger brother followed him to the US.

Illustration 6.2. The mother of the family in her village house

She is in front of the pictures of her oversees brother, who left twenty years ago.

Jeneba has a tailor's workshop in Bamenda. She started this sort of work in Nigeria and brought her machines with her when they moved to Bamenda (to escape the interethnic "wars" in Nigeria). She has had a mobile phone for a few years and explains how important it is for her to be in contact with her sisters, to call her daughter and sister in Nigeria and to be able to contact her uncles in America too. She even gave me her uncle's number in America. Since she has a phone, she calls him regularly and passes his messages on to the others. Jeneba explains how they have used the phone now for four years and before that they only had sporadic contact because it was very

expensive to call. They had to go to the post office to make telephone calls in Bamenda. It was Ali (their brother in America) who used to call via his brother who had a landline in Bamenda. For FCFA 1000 then, it was just about possible to say “hello” (*noddi tan timi*). They would also write letters but mailing a letter to America used to also cost FCFA 500. Interestingly enough, they had not calculated the costs of using a mobile phone. Jeneba’s sister from Yaoundé, Rukiatu, also has a phone and both were called several times during our stay in Sabga. Later when I visited Rukiatu in Yaoundé, where she lives in a two-room apartment, the phone was her constant companion. She called people from Sabga, her sister in Bamenda and her husband to talk about the day’s activities.

Penda, another sister, told me she was divorced. She used to be married and lived in another Fulbe village in the Grassfields but she left her five children with her husband there. She visits them from time to time and was thinking aloud while we were talking about what she could do. She felt like she was “sitting”, without work. She wanted to go to Bamenda where she could probably find work in a house, but on the other hand that would also be difficult for her. But what to do if you have no other choice? Aisata’s other two daughters had married within the Fulbe community and live in small villages near Panso. These three sisters did not have phones in 2007. Nor did Aisata. When I left and gave Aisata a gift, she told me this would be added to her savings to buy her own phone. In 2008 she did have a phone, which she had received from her daughter Jeneba. Jeneba also gave a phone to her daughter and to her youngest brother because she wanted to be able to contact them. It is clear that her tailoring business is doing well and, as she explained herself, the phone facilitates her work. She no longer travels that much to buy cloth but can call and pay through Credit Union. She buys her cloth in Ngaoundere and Garoua where the Fulani style is more easily available than in Bamenda.

In the summer of 2006 brother Ali visited Sabga, Yaoundé and Douala. Jeneba explained that this was due to the more intense contact they had had by mobile phone. Ali simply could no longer refuse to visit his family although his stay was very short. The pictures that Jeneba showed me later of this visit show everybody in his or her best outfit and cars to celebrate the event.

Discussion

From these examples and the historical description of the region it is clear that the communication ecology of the Grassfields has undergone changes. The advances in communication technologies have made travelling and communicating easier. Wireless technology has been the latest development and was introduced and accepted in the region very rapidly. Mobile communication was never this widespread before and it is expected that expansion will continue.[11] The revolution that is ascribed to it however should be understood in relation to the area's history of communication, one that has always been intrinsically linked to the development of a mobile society, or migrant culture. The dynamic relationship between communication and society seems to be at the heart of the rapid integration of the phone, and change in continuity is perhaps the best description for our observations.

The presence of wireless communication shows in companies' advertisements and their profit-making strategies. These companies are new players in the field of communication and can be defined as new institutions. Their strategies in Africa are aimed at the development of modes of use for the phone that allow the very poor to use it, like, for instance, Jeneba's use of "beeping". Or the fact that one can phone for free during the night, which has become the time to keep friendships alive, as shown in the phone behaviour of the young people in the Bikong family. Another aspect are the companies' advertisements and campaigns that were particularly visible on the streets of Bamenda by their distinctive use of yellow, and the screaming advertisements about

[11] Interview at the MTN office, August 2009.

"winning numbers". The companies have introduced a new world to the Grassfields: a world of quick communication and a world with an explosion of modern life where opportunities for getting a better life appear to be within reach. A remark by a Bamenda friend summarizes the situation very well: "When we go into the MTN office it is as if we are stepping into another world, and some people hardly dare to do so".

This new technology relates to the modern world where electricity and money are available, and where people have access to mobile communication technology. It first developed in towns and only later arrived in the rural areas but people are very inventive about accessing wireless technology even if there is no electricity in their village. There are still many areas in the Grassfields where there is no electricity and roads are inaccessible but we observed that people do have phones in these areas. They travel to areas with network access and electricity to communicate. In other instances, we met people in the villages where electricity is absent and network access rare who appropriated the few network spots in the village and used batteries to charge their phones. These individuals have become the new messengers in these villages (De Bruijn et al*.,* fc). It is clear that there is now more intense interaction with the cities and urban life than ever before for those in rural areas.[12]

However we should sincerely question the newness of the technology. As we stated in the introduction, the phone revolution needs to be questioned. We can only do so if we compare the present with the past and in this case we are trying to understand present-day communication with past communication methods. As it is evident from the two examples and the description of the communication ecology of the area, Grassfielders and Fulani have always been intense communicators and maintaining relations is an essential part of their social life: it keeps the community together. We could say that the network society was already well advanced in the Grassfields before the arrival of the mobile phones but the techniques for communicating – like being mobile, travelling

[12] Small towns are becoming part of an intriguing dynamic related to the new possibilities that ICT offers.

(first by foot, then by bus) and the writing of letters – had a much lower speed of communication then mobile phone technology has. The case studies do indeed show that people are communicating more, that it is a very direct form of communication where one has an answer immediately, and that communication has become more frequent. What are the consequences of this for social relations? Jeneba was explicit about this when she said that, for her, the family has become closer. She feels more related to her uncle now than before. This resonates with the argument that distances have been shortened with the increasing speed of communication. The example of the Bikong family also shows that contact over distance with family members living in the US has been facilitated. For the family's young sons, going to the US for schooling is just an extension of their present world. Their perception of this distance is essentially different from that of the older generation who explained their experiences when they travelled to the US in the 1960s. When they came back, they showed the first photographs of America because it was an unknown world in Cameroon until then. Today, there are images of the US everywhere and it is unusual to meet a family that does not have family members living overseas. This shortening of distances is also visible in the US and Europe where migrants seem to have difficulties leaving their Cameroonian realm, as was the case with the son who had left to further his education in Europe. Nyamnjoh (2005b) has described this closing of distances or the union of worlds overseas as a frightening and imposing phenomenon as well. It has become very difficult to escape one's own community while still being far away.

These findings are similar to the outcome of research in US and European societies that suggest the tendency for relations over greater distances to become more accessible and play a more important role in daily life. This is especially true for so-called "strong" relations. "Weak" relations, which exist for example with one's neighbour and people close by, are pushed into the background. Whether this will lead to more

social tension, as was advanced by Granovetter (1973),[13] or to the emergence of more individually directed networks (Castells 2004; Vertovec, 2004) is still to be seen in Cameroon.

However what is clear is that the shortening of distances and mobile communication technology may have introduced people to larger communities with more communication possibilities to explore, but it has not changed the forms of relationships people had. It seems that the mobile phone, though it may be seen as being revolutionary, has been easily integrated into the Cameroonian families we described because they were already communicating easily and integrated various forms of communication in their lives, a lifestyle that is related to the specific economy of the area in which mobility has been part of the lifestyle. Any changes should be interpreted as changes in continuity.

We could thus question the conclusion of other studies where they have emphasized that this new form of communication, combined with the Internet and easy ways of travelling, has developed societies of in-betweenness where people are neither at home nor outsiders (cf Nyamnjoh, 2005b). However for Jeneba and her family and for the Bikong family, this in-betweenness seems to fit their situation. They live in a mobile community which is their life. The US and Cameroon have become their world; or in the case of Jeneba, Bamenda, Panso, Sabga and Yaoundé are one in which she easily moves and to which she belongs, a world that has a long history in the communication ecology of these families' social lives and economy.

These practices of communication remind us of an analysis of these societies in which flexibility is central and where people are capable of moving into new realms in their social life and in which they easily integrate other economies in their lives (cf.

[13] Special report on "Mobile Telecoms; Nomads at Last", *The Economist,* 12 April 2008. See Granovetter (1973, 1983) for more details on this theory, which is essential for the functioning of the social fabric because too much emphasis on strong ties may lead to isolation. The relationship between weak and strong ties in a social network is linked to social class, levels of education and social hierarchies. Granovetter's theory invites reflection on the effects of mobile phones in the social margins. The hypothesis is that the disappearance of weak ties will lead to a potential increase in social conflict. His ideas are now being adopted into analyses of network theories.

Nyamnjoh, 2006). Flexibility is an important characteristic of social relations in a travelling culture in a context of insecurity. Examples are flexibility in aid relations (von Benda-Beckman et al*.,* 1994), in kinship relations (De Bruijn and van Dijk, 1995), in relations with the state (avoidance) (Pelckmans, 2007) and in certainly relations with "others", the people who the traveller meets in the new environment. Inequality and processes of in- and exclusion lead to a continuous redefinition of these relations and are part of this flexibility (Nyamnjoh, 2006). This lifestyle has certainly developed in communities that can be depicted as mobile communities, and with a history of mobility (cf. De Bruijn et al*.,* 2001). It is for this reason that the analysis of the mobile phone revolution has to be analyzed as well as continuity, and should be understood in the specific characteristics of the history of communication in the area.

Nevertheless, we should not neglect the new possibilities that are emerging in these communities. It is clear that Jeneba's economic life has become more organized and her business is doing better today than a few years ago. She herself links the success she is now having to the new possibilities for communicating. It also leads people in Cameroon to closer relations with those far away, which can also change their ideas about the community overseas. And it is a fact that people are travelling more, bringing pictures home and with these pictures a lot of stories. This certainly changes people's ideas and mindsets.

Conclusion

Research into communication ecology and recent innovations in mobile telephony is ongoing, with the number of researchers increasing all the time. It is a phenomenon that is visible in social and economic fields and in the world of business (The Economist, September 2009). We need to develop inter-disciplinary encounters to grasp these new dynamics which are not confined to the social sciences and humanities, and to include business and the commercial world in our endeavours. This article has offered an analysis of some of the social transformations seen by using

qualitative data when researching Cameroonian family histories where the history of communication ecology is central. The ethnography of communication ecology has to be flexible, such as including those living and working in the social margins and their contact with the new communication technology. The revolution of mobile telephony should be understood within the social dynamics of the societies we are studying and in the case of the Grassfields in Cameroon, this revolution can easily be seen. However we should not overlook the continuities and their embeddedness in a society that has a long history of communication and mobility.

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