

Connecting in mobile communities: an African case study

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Mirjam de Bruijn

African Studies Centre, Leiden University, Netherlands

Abstract

African geographical mobilities should be understood in terms of their increasingly global development over the last two decades, and as an interplay of scales of mobility between continents and between African regions or nations. The relationship between these various times and scales of mobility shape mobile communities as a daily reality for many Africans. African family histories and personal lives are full of connecting with those who have left. In recent years, these daily practices have been radically altered by improvements in communication technology – with travel, radio messages and letter writing being replaced by mobile telephony as the main connecting technology. This article explores how the development of connecting technology has changed the social dynamics of African mobile communities and focuses on the changes in (old and new) social hierarchies that are related to possibilities of accessing mobility and connecting technologies. It is based on a qualitative case study of a mobile community in Africa, which is part of the Mobile Africa Revisited programme that is investigating the relationship between new ICTs, mobility, marginality and social hierarchies.

Keywords

Africa, Cameroon, communication, family history, ICT, mobility

The family story

I came across this car parked at a police station on the Cameroon-Nigeria border while I was following the itinerary of the working life of the father of my student and research

Corresponding author:

Mirjam de Bruijn, Leiden University, Lipsius building, Cleveringaplaats 1, room 2.24, Leiden, 3211 VL, Netherlands.

Email: m.e.de.bruijn@hum.leidenuniv.nl

assistant in Cameroon.¹ The car is old and must have been left in the compound in the 1980s but seemed to be symbolic in my assistant's memory. He was born in 1979 and would have been about six when his father left his car here. His father went to the police academy in Nigeria when it was under British colonial rule because West Cameroon was administered as part of Nigeria between 1922 and 1961. He graduated and served the Cameroonian state as a policeman from 1961 to 1985, when he retired. The border town where we found the car is far from the place that is mentioned as the cradle of his family, which is a small chiefdom on the plains of the Cameroonian Grassfields. In memory and practice, this chiefdom is today an almost mythical place where the father, who died in 2003, is buried on the top of a hill, 'his hill'. My assistant never lived there but travelled with his parents to different places in the North and the Southwest provinces of Cameroon, from Kumbo, Limbe (then Victoria), to Eyomujock and Oku on the border, back to their home village and to a town in the Grassfields in Northwest province. His parents were sent to these different places to serve the Cameroonian state as a nurse and a policeman, and he went with them until he reached boarding-school age and was sent to school in a city near his 'home' village. The family consisted of his father and his father's four wives and their children. Polygamy is normal practice in the cultural traditions of the chiefdoms in the Grassfields, where children represent wealth for the family. The first wife, who his father divorced, had one son; the second also had a son (but after giving birth she left); the third wife is my assistant's mother and, as was mentioned several times, was the favourite wife. They had seven children, although one son died. After retiring, the father married a fourth wife, with whom he had another five children.

In this article, the stories of the father, his third wife and their six surviving children are central. This family has always had the means to be connected to the people they wanted



Figure 1. Stranded car at the border (photo © Mirjam de Bruijn, 2009).

to be connected to as they had a car and the means to travel. Their car allowed them to remain connected to the home village and aunts and their grandmother came to the different places where they lived over the years. This mobility led to the creation of a strong network of kin and other social relations. The family's mobility was a consequence of the parents' education and subsequent employment by the state. If we trace the grown-up children in 2012, we can see that it is education that has taken them to places far from their home village. They live in the US, the Netherlands, the UK, Nigeria and Belgium, and have also been based in South Africa. Their means of communication today is principally the mobile phone, and one that accesses the internet too. The itineraries of the family members appear to follow developments in communication technologies.

The project

I went to Cameroon in 2006 to explore a new research project focusing on the development of communication technology and social dynamics. It was the time when mobile technology was arriving in remote places where I had done research before (e.g. Central Mali and Central Chad) and it was clear that there was social change afoot that would probably make this a crucial moment in the (future) development of their relations: a 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002). The region where I started the research in northwestern Cameroon is known for its long tradition of mobility and was well suited to research into the relationship between mobility and changes in communication technologies. As the central research question was geared more towards social change in terms of belonging and identity, I decided to work with a qualitative approach and, in ethnographic-historical tradition, to follow people in their histories and itineraries (Brinkman and de Bruijn, 2012; White et al., 2001).²

The research project on mobile telephony and society in Africa, which started in 2008, is currently (2013) delivering its first results, and this article is an attempt to get to grips with all the information generated. This qualitative research project investigated the relationship between mobility and the new technologies when communicating in marginal zones in Africa (de Bruijn et al., 2009, 2013). It is comparative research both in time and space, and the main case study for this article (introduced above) relates to Anglophone Cameroon. Social dynamics in the relationship between mobility and communication entail social relating, but also changing power and emotional relations. These three elements can be summarized under feelings and processes of social belonging that are the glue in these societies. How do the dynamics of belonging in mobile communities relate to the recent changes in the availability of communication technologies in Africa?

This article describes one of the families that I have been following since 2008. I first met the eldest sister, who is a prominent figure in church life, and through her I got to know the younger brother, who was keen to participate in the research and became my assistant. The fact that his father (who died in 2003) had kept a diary from 1979 to 2003 triggered my curiosity in the family's history, and I ended up following their historical itineraries as they were relevant and interesting in relation to the changes in the communication ecology of the region under study. For five years now I have thus been part and parcel of the life of this family as it is expressed in the diaspora, their home town and village, on the phone and on their Facebook pages. This article is based on observations

and interviews, but especially on the friendly encounters, shared parties and other moments of joy and sadness that revealed their family life to me.³

The stories of the different family members represent the reality of mobile communities in the new age of communication. This article follows the entanglement of different communication technologies and how these influence their mobility dynamics. The question is how the connectedness that was provided by the car has been replaced by mobile technology, and whether it has transformed the social dynamics in the interrelationships of this family and their community at large. I then combine some recent insights into communication and mobility to develop a framework to interpret the relationship between communication and mobility and change in the second half of the article. How revolutionary has the introduction of the mobile phone technology been in 'remote' Africa in relation to the mobile communities that have been formed over long experiences of migration?

The relationship between mobility and communication

The short introduction to this family also introduces the changes in the communication landscape in Cameroon and Africa over the past two decades. In this relatively short period, regions without good road infrastructure or telephone lines suddenly became well connected through wireless technologies. With the advance of mobile technology, socio-economic change would follow, especially in some parts of Africa where this new technology has had a 'leapfrogging' effect. Access to communication was expected to 'develop' Africa, that is, lead to a 'revolution' (Etzo and Collender, 2010). This article concentrates on changes in the relational sphere, whose developmental effects may not be that easy to define.

The major change in the social in the relational sphere has been diminishing distances and increasing connectivity, that is, communication as the 'glue' of society (Vertovec, 2004). This ties in with discussions in globalization studies that refer to the global village (Piot, 1999) or in transnational studies that emphasize the social space dynamics in the transnational community. Early studies on mobile phone use in Europe also indicate this increasing connectivity in social relations (Katz, 2006; Ling, 2004), though not always and not for everybody. Hence the idea that in a world of endless connectivity, the non-connected will form the 'fourth world' (Castells et al., 2007). It was predicted that mobile telephony would bring about an increase in some relationship patterns and not others (*The Economist*, 2008). Indeed connectivity goes hand in hand with de-connections (de Bruijn and van Dijk, 2012), not only through the inability to access mobile telephony but also as a consequence of social dynamics and hierarchies in society. Archambault (2011), for instance, shows how the mobile phone as an object of connectivity also gives feelings of disconnection for youth in Mozambique.

These studies all show a mutual relationship between society and technology, where the mobile phone has become a change agent in interaction with society (cf. Horst and Miller, 2006; de Bruijn et al., 2009). However the direction of the transformative power of mobile telephony still has to be better understood. The opening case in this article highlighted the continuity of social relations in which new technologies of communication 'land'. It is the existing patterns of communication that enable or disable the transformative power of the new 'tool'. Tacchi et al. (2003) and Altheide (1994)

introduced the notion of communication ecology to indicate the web of relations that exist in society between the social and technology, and how this changes over time (see also de Bruijn, 2010). The communication ecology of the case study can be characterized by mobility, rapid change in access to communication technologies from the 1960s onwards and a contradictory infrastructural development. Here I focus on how access to mobile communication technology has changed as well as sustained relations in the communication ecology of this family and their community.

The community under study is considered 'mobile', a mobility that has been part of their family for a long time and relates back to the parents' itineraries between the 1960s and the 1980s. The example shows an apparent change in this mobility, from being state driven to economically driven. Nevertheless, the older and newer forms, the far away and the close by are interwoven, even today. The reasons for this mobility vary: from education to jobs and labour to curiosity. What binds people together is seemingly a form of social relating. And an important notion in such a mobile cultural and social constellation is the feeling of belonging somewhere. The idea of belonging is extremely strong in the Grassfields, where this case study starts out from. Other authors have linked this belonging to the notion of home and belonging to a family, and their respective land and villages (Geschiere, 2009; H. Nyamnjoh, 2013). Belonging, as an essential feature of the social fabric in this society, is a glue consisting of emotions that keeps societies and families together.

The family's story also contains a contradiction: the strong wish to move away and to find greener pastures elsewhere goes with a solid feeling of belonging. How is the geographical spread of society combined with this belonging and how do the members of these geographically spread families and communities maintain robust relationships? Here mobility combines with communication and communication technologies as tools to link up and establish strong relationships. The social networks and ties that people develop are a result of the interaction between society and its communication technologies (cf. Bruijn et al., 2009; Hahn, 2012; Latour, 2005).

This article takes the reader to a time when mobility is being confronted with a new turn in communication, namely mobile telephony. Has this turn the potential to change underlying continuities that define the dynamics of this society? Has it been a 'vital conjuncture', described by Johnson-Hanks (2002) as a moment when agency and structure meet and make new directions in life possible (cf. de Bruijn et al., 2007)? The direction of change at such moments is not predictable, however. It is these turns in people's life histories that inform us about the ways in which society is changing.

The internet and mobile telephony are the new glue in societies (Vertovec, 2004). Does this glue now contain similar emotions that relate to feelings of belonging as referred to above? The search to understand the glue of mobile societies relates this article to a new paradigm in social studies: the 'mobility turn' (Ernste et al., 2012), where the transformative power of mobility is central (de Bruijn et al., 2001). When we add the communication turn to the mobility turn, there will be even greater emphasis on connections and connectivity as an entity of analysis (de Bruijn and van Dijk, 2012). Here we are trying to understand social change/dynamics in a Cameroonian Grassfields society by analysing changes in mobility and communication technology, that is, possibilities of connectivity and their contribution to the configuration of the glue of society.

Changes in the communication landscape

At the time I was starting my research on mobile telephony in Cameroon in 2006, the mobile telephone companies were rolling out their networks to the rural areas and small towns. They had arrived in Africa in 1998 when the communications market was liberalized. The urban areas had turned into a phone landscape as MTN and Orange⁴ painted towns in Anglophone Cameroon yellow and orange. Their huge advertising billboards screamed out messages about how communication would ease life, and shops and boutiques became yellow overnight thanks to the free paint provided by MTN. Telephony had also become a new branch in the urban economy, as indicated by the many phone shops and phone booths on the streets. Repairs and sales of phones have become important new employment opportunities, especially for young men, and selling airtime and phone cards is popular among young women (de Bruijn et al., 2010).

The period before the mobile telephone arrived on the scene was one of difficult connectivity for the region. Roads were bumpy, links with Nigeria were almost non-existent and fixed telephone lines were the privilege of the happy few (Nkwi, 2009). Letter writing was the main means of communicating with those who were far away and sometimes photographs would accompany letters. Today these have been partially (but not yet completely) replaced by mobile communication.

The cost of making a call at the post office in the past (which was the only public phone until the arrival of wireless connections) was very high and people usually only called on special occasions. At the start of the mobile phone era in 1998, charges for phone calls from mobile phones were also high but they dropped after a few years and today a call costs a few FCFA cents, or FCFA 200⁵ at an expensive call booth. Prices of mobile phones have also declined due to imports of (cheap) phones from China (via Dubai) but also because companies are always promoting phones. For around FCFA 15,000 one can buy a new phone at the market and a smart phone costs FCFA 30,000. These prices are affordable for many, and those who cannot afford a new phone look in the second-hand market. This turn in the communication ecology of the area has signified a turn in possibilities for connecting, and also a turn in ideas and flows that have allowed people to find new opportunities, get to know the other world and simply to connect to people who are far away. In 2012 Cameroon had more than 50%⁶ mobile phone coverage compared to 1998 when the figure was practically zero.

In this communication landscape we met the family whose case study is presented in this article. Connection to wireless networks in the village went from being rather patchy in 2008 to well connected in 2011. The small town where the eldest sister is based has had good connectivity since 2000. There was only one family member who had no mobile phone: the half-brother who is considered a bit eccentric. He is involved in traditional medicine and lives in the village, but without a phone. The mother, the sons, the daughters and their children all have phones, and some have two. And everybody accessed the internet now and then, though the sons were more frequently found in the internet café. Since 2011 they have had mobile internet, which was initially a novelty. Communication is central in the lives of this family, at least these data would seem to suggest this. This is certainly not only the case today as research into the family history revealed.

Let's go back and expand on the methods of communication used during the father's and mother's working lives. The means of communication then were letters and sending photographs of moments of importance: a child's birthday, the children at school and at university. The most important was, however, the car, their own car but also public transport. The children could not all go to school where the parents worked and thus only met up during school holidays. It was not only immediate family members but also aunts, uncles, cousins and others who travelled long distances to visit the family to celebrate important family moments that were held at home.⁷ A web of communication technologies kept the family informed and in touch.

Mobility of the children: the generation after independence

Moh (born in 1969), my assistant's elder brother, today acts as his father's successor, that is, the head of the family. Moh is not a name but a title for the family 'leader'. After a childhood of travelling with the family and sharing family life with his brothers and cousins, who were adopted for the period of their schooling by his father, he went to university in Yaoundé where he was awarded a BA in literature. Unable to find a job, he decided to try his luck in South Africa, where he met a South African girl (a niece of Mandela's), married and had a son. But his wife died in a car accident just two years later. He worked in restaurants in South Africa as a waiter and earned good money. Moh came back to Cameroon in 2003 for his father's funeral, and was appointed as his father's successor, a duty one cannot refuse. He then decided to return to Cameroon with his son. He was responsible for the family, including the resolution of conflicts, and also had to look after the many estates his father had acquired during his life.

He decided to leave Cameroon again, this time for Belgium and the Netherlands to meet up with his old girlfriend from his school days who he was planning to marry. They were a good match he thought, but she had in the meantime found her way to Europe with her mother who married in Germany. Another reason for him to leave was that he could not find a reasonable job in Cameroon. I helped him with a letter of invitation and in 2011 he was able to start his studies in Belgium. In May 2012 he graduated and disappeared to the US, probably funded by his father's sister who lives there. His elder sister told me (while I was in Cameroon) that he had moved to the US because it had become clear that marriage to his old girlfriend would not work. And later, when Moh and I had email contact, he explained that 'he tried' in the US. He would hang on.

Although Moh has been away from Cameroon for quite a few years now, he still manages to fulfil his duties as his father's successor and deals with all the issues that arise by phone, often in collaboration with one of his uncles who is his intermediary there. When his mother became ill in 2011, he managed to send her money and if there are funerals or weddings, he always calls and sends cards and money. In short, he is still in close contact with his family in Cameroon.

Moh's story shows the continuation of the mobility that he was acquainted with during his youth, but he seems restless. As the story continues, we see him ending up in Europe and later in the US, but his reasons for being this mobile are not the same as those of his father. And his mobility is not dependent on cars and roads but on planes and telephones. His story shows the further development of types of mobilities and the varieties

that have been common since the 1990s. The economic crisis in the 1990s that came with the liberalization of the market in Africa and the imposed economic reforms created an unstable job market. Combined with a patronage system, this led to a situation in which many people could not access a decent job or learn a good trade. These often well-educated young people (with at least a high-school certificate or a BA), who were hoping for a good future, were disappointed and tried their luck elsewhere, in the city or abroad. This economy of uncertainty inspired a lot of the new types of mobilities, and it certainly led Moh and his brothers to move in search of a better life and educational possibilities. This differs from the previous generation in the sense that they are mobile as a result of a lack of alternatives in their own country. Their parents, on the other hand, were mobile because they were fulfilling their duty as good Cameroonian citizens. However, both mobilities are accepted as part of the culture and customs, both then and now. When we ask people why the Grassfielders are so mobile, the answer is that mobility is a part of their history, the chiefdoms are all based on migration and, in colonial times, forced labour to the plantations also led to a mobile culture of 'bush falling' (Nyamnjoh, 2011). It is therefore not strange that Moh's absence does not seem to impact on his successful functioning within the family.

Another way of keeping in contact with the family is travel. Family members based in Cameroon occasionally visit family abroad and pictures of these trips are the first to be shown to any visitor who comes to the house. However, getting 'there', for example, travelling from Cameroon to the US, is not easy and is full of uncertainties. The youngest sister studies in the US but to get a visa to visit her, her mother has to enter the dynamics of visa acquirement. As the eldest daughter has a good house, she borrows money against it from a wealthy community member who then puts money in the bank account of the family member who is planning to travel. (This can amount to millions of FCFA to guarantee the income required to obtain a visa.) The formalities take a long time and the money has to be kept in the account for the whole period. The interest paid over and above the money, as a payment for the 'service', is high. The time before last they could not leave the money in the account for long enough as they did not have the means. Consequently the visa was refused. Last summer (2012) her visa application was again turned down, on the basis of the argument that they did not expect her to return to Cameroon. The mother was very confused as they had then managed to have FCFA 14 million in their 'visa account'. Her daughter, however, was allowed to go. She met not only the sister and many other family members in the US, but also Moh and her two sons who are studying there.

Travel is thus attached to letters of invitation and proof of being able to sustain oneself financially. This provokes the use of social connections to create temporary or imaginary wealth. The two sons of the eldest sister and her three brothers left Cameroon on study visas. The two sons were facilitated by their paternal aunt who lives in the US and the two brothers by their Dutch friend (me), who organized letters of invitation to get them a study permit. The organization of mobility itineraries became blurred following numerous exchanges on the phone. Applying for the visa itself and the controls surrounding it are part and parcel of the same digitalization that includes the mobile phone. Migration itself is part of the uncertainty that characterizes the life of this family and is mitigated by the workings of the social networks. Jill-Alpes' (2011) research on women's

migration from southwest Cameroon describes the procedures in detail. The semi-illegal networks that help people to access mobility are all in dire need of money and the brokers that are in this business are the rich people in the community. Access to a good set of relatives abroad helps but wealth is also a necessary input. Access to mobility is thus unequal (Nyamnjoh, 2006), but the family in this case study is clearly able to play the game relatively successfully.

Yet the mobility of the family is not always what it seems to be. There are so many constraints, of which the most apparent is the contradictory ending in immobility as the story of the third brother, who lives in England, illustrates. He went to the UK on a study visa but after graduating he did not return home. His mobility in relation to study has turned to immobility in the UK as the only way to remain (illegally) there is not to move at all. He is very active on his Facebook page, where he stays in contact with his family and with his cousins in the US. He calls his family on the internet on a regular basis and talks to his mother every week. When I met him in London in 2010 and 2011 he knew all the news about the family and did not appear to be cut off from them. He gave me a bag of clothes and second-hand shoes to take to his brother Moh, who was then still living in Brussels, although this bag was never delivered because Moh's mobility (from Belgium to the Netherlands) was by then very limited due to a lack of money.

The expectations of mobility that the migrant and his family have from the moment of departure often become a deception in the country of arrival and in the end immobility is their plight (cf. Adey, 2010; Carling, 2002). However their mobility is part of the (perceived) uncertainty economy of the family. The success of the migrant turns into an enforced stay that is only bearable because of the phone and internet contact that, in turn, create a connectivity that turns apparent immobility into a feeling of belonging.

Glue of the mobile society

The case study has so far portrayed the image of a tight-knit family that is closely connected and that has been following each other's itineraries and lives since the 1960s. How typical is this family for the social fabric of Grassfields society in northwestern Cameroon? And how does this translate into a society that extends to all corners of the world? How does the extension of the community/family to other parts of the world through extensive migration networks create social relations of kin, age and gender in space?

Gender, age and kin relations are key to social relations in a society, and especially so in the Cameroonian environment where a lack of state services means that these relations are crucial for social care. What has been labelled informal social security has become part of the glue of mobile communities. Grassfields society is organized in chiefdoms that add important social hierarchies. Our family is one of those families that are considered to be of noble status and this gives them a specific relationship with regard to other people in their chiefdom. It also entails more responsibilities towards other families, hence the father's wide network despite living away from the village. His sons and daughters carry this hierarchy with them and have had to take over these responsibilities. This explains the burden on the shoulders of his successor, Moh. Within the family, there

are more obligations, first of all vis-a-vis the mother, but also towards their younger siblings, and finally there are the gender relations within marriage. Caring and taking care of each other is not a real exchange but is embedded in the hierarchies between families and within the family. These obligations are strong and are sanctioned with the gain or loss of family pride. In the end, although it seems that Moh has assumed his family obligations of his own free will, they are a burden he cannot escape.

These relations and obligations do not disappear when a family member moves far away. The out-migrating young men cannot, in general, avoid taking care of their parents back in their home village or city. This is especially so in cases where the young man was supported in his travels by the family (often the mother). The importance of these relations and how they form the glue of a society is also evident in the way marriages are arranged. Cameroonians who have left to look for jobs elsewhere usually marry a woman from Cameroon, which is also the wish of the family. In the end, the woman has therefore to leave and join her husband. Marrying a 'foreigner' may of course happen, but the foreign wife then has to adapt to the morals of the Cameroonian community and also becomes in a way part of the glue as well.

The closeness of these relations and having the role of social glue, also has a flipside as people can feel such relations as overly controlling (Nyamnjoh, 2005). After all, social relations are never 'free of charge'; they always include reciprocity. Here, in exchange for the (financial) support of the family at home, a person is allowed to belong to the family, the village and the chiefdom. Without belonging it is impossible to be.

Probably the most explicit expressions of this belonging offered to me concerned the third son, who was my research assistant for a few months and who moved to the Netherlands when he was 30 to do an MA.⁸ When he arrived in the Netherlands and had moved into his student accommodation, the first things he put on the wall were the pictures of his mother, sisters and brothers and finally of himself in a beautiful outfit that he was wearing like a model in the Cameroon fashion world. He was on the phone at least once a week to his mother and did not 'miss' one social event in his village back home. Although he hardly had any money as a student living on a meagre income, he managed to send money home for funerals and marriages, and to support his mother. Interestingly, his urban identity seemed to vanish in the stories he told about Cameroon and he became the village boy that he in fact never was. Through him I came to be a participant in the Facebook exchanges of the family. The tradition of photography showing the travel experiences to others is back on Facebook, one could say. At first this was especially an interaction space for the brothers, his younger sister and their cousins, but recently the elder sister has joined in as well. And the internet serves the family in other ways too: they exchange emails and are members of various internet networks related to village associations and to political discussions (cf. de Bruijn et al., 2010; Meester, forthcoming). The older members of the family in Cameroon do not participate in this, although members of their generation in the diaspora do to a certain extent. The exchanges between the different generations in the family are mostly by phone.

What transpires in these relationships and the way family members deal with them is that geographical distance does not lead to any deviation in the society's values and rules of care. On the contrary, migrants are expected to contribute as before. Their marriages to women from their own village, or at least from the region, reinforce these ties. As is

revealed in other studies on migration, remittances are an important element in the relationship between the migrant and the family back home (Mazzucato, 2008). The role of the mother is interesting. They are often very powerful within the family network and are usually involved in the decisions that the sons and other male members take concerning migration. The cases that I encountered in the field confirm this and the financial part of it too: women even sell houses to send their sons abroad. This is not to send them away as such but, on the contrary, to receive from them what is expected of them in their role as a male member of the family. The migration itineraries of young men confirm their role as the caretakers of their siblings and their parents, and, in a way, their subordinate role. The family hierarchies are kept in place but distance increases expectations and it is difficult for young men to live up to these expectations when they have to start at the bottom of the economic ladder in the country they have migrated to. Nevertheless, these care/hierarchical ties are the above-mentioned glue that keeps their society together.

The social fabric in the Grassfields is thus a web of relations that has no geographical limits. It extends from the village to the small towns to Nigeria, Europe and beyond. These social relations carry a cultural pattern inherited from traditions and a lived reality for those who perceive themselves as being part of this social fabric. It is an inheritance of power differences and ascribed roles defined for social groups, or for the individual. First of all, it is a web of shared space/place relations that is combined with a shared identity that is either national (Cameroonian), regional or ethnically defined. The duties that go with these values are not hampered by distance. Moh's case is illustrative. As his father's successor, he is responsible for a wide family network and all the conflicts, problems and obligations rest on his shoulders. His father left the family some estates, land and houses that have now become his responsibility, one he cannot escape. It is a duty that has been bestowed upon him. Nevertheless, he could not resist trying his luck elsewhere, first in Belgium and then in the US after marriage to his old girlfriend in The Hague did not work out. In short, he travelled the international family network. How could he do this without losing his credibility as his father's successor? It became clear to me from our chats and frequent contacts that the family supported his decision to move away and they all agreed, especially his elder sister and mother, that Cameroon offered no future to a young man like him. Being abroad did not mean that Moh lost contact; on the contrary he was constantly on the phone, on Facebook and on the internet. When his mother was sick, he called her every day and also the doctors at the hospital, and he encouraged his uncles to get her decent treatment. He sent money whenever he could. On Facebook he keeps in touch with his family members and friends. In short, he is almost constantly online and expects immediate replies. Back home in Cameroon, it is the mobile phone that does the work and Mobile Money and/or Western Union.

The explanation of the eldest sister shows how their youth spent travelling did not dissociate them from their community: she feels she belongs to the chieftdom and village despite the fact that she never really lived there. She was not born in the village, but in the Southwest Region in Victoria (in today's Limbe). So she does not in fact have a real home to which she belongs in a geographical sense. Walking with her through the village, however, it is as if she has been there all her life; she literally knows everybody. How has this come about? Her answer was that her father introduced her so well to the social relations

in the village by always having people in their house that she could not avoid knowing everybody. When she was a child and they lived in different places she was always surrounded by kin, who either came to visit or were living in the neighbourhood. So despite their geographical displacement they were aware of the social relations that surrounded them. The social relations create their sense of belonging. During a trip to the village she showed another side of this belonging. Her phone is hardly in her bag as she is constantly being called or is calling someone herself. It is December and migrants are coming home for the holidays. They call the eldest sister to see if they can visit her, have dinner or a drink. For example, the male relative that Moh lives with in Maryland is in town for a few days and she insists that he visits her. She wants to prepare some food so that he has a good impression. They make at least six phone calls to arrange this. Her brother, who lives in the UK, calls her on the internet to save money. Her other brother (my friend) called her a few days ago from Nigeria. She has become dependent on the phone to keep her relationships alive, both with those who are 'useful' for her brothers abroad and with her own family, in short with all those who are living at a distance.

Generations: social change or continuity?

There is a big difference between the movement of sons and daughters and their parents. The father and mother in this family had to move because of their jobs, to which they were appointed by the state. Their sons and daughter have moved to find education, work and opportunities but have been abandoned by the state. The difference between the generations of this relatively wealthy family is related to the economic situation in Cameroon today and the position of the family. Where the father had a good job and a future in the new-born Cameroon after independence, his sons live in an economy of uncertainty in which a perspective for the future is lacking, hence their journeys to Europe and the US. Such displacement does not however hamper the next generation from following the rules of the society and the ideologies of their parents. In the chats, interviews and serious intimate encounters I had with the daughter⁹ and sons, they all expressed their admiration for their father, who symbolized the norms and values of their family. This also transpires in political choices: the three young men vote for the political opposition in a Cameroon that has an oppressive regime. They still follow the choice their father made later in his life when he had left state service and turned to being an estate owner and businessman, and an opposition leader. The car, however, has been replaced by new modes of transport and especially by connections using wireless technology.

The other brother (my assistant and student), who went to the Netherlands to study, returned to Cameroon. He did not stay for long but almost immediately continued his journey to Abuja in Nigeria where he attended another university. His phone is on and he uses the internet but is no longer very active on Facebook. For him, money is a serious concern and he confirmed that life in Nigeria is too expensive but he will not lose touch with his family. While he was studying in the Netherlands, he got married and his wife gave birth to a baby girl. This provides assurance for his family that he will live up to their expectations as a son of the soil. However such a tie does not hamper him in his movements. On the contrary, for him this mobility is part of his life career and instead of destroying his

relationships, it has helped him to establish contacts everywhere he goes. Such a social basis seems to be more than necessary for his well-being: he is in regular contact with kin and friends all over the world. Whenever I call him he gives me detailed updates on the family and their neighbourhood in town, the village, Yaoundé, the US and Europe.

Back to the father and mother. When the father retired, he began a new life in a small town and in his village, about 60 km from the main town where his children live today. He set up a sugar factory, invested in rice cultivation and became a wealthy man. And as a result of his deep disappointment in the postcolonial project of the Cameroonian state that failed to live up to its promises, he decided to join the political opposition. His later life was full of politics as his sons vividly recall. With this political choice, his return home was also confirmed politically, as the chiefdom of which his family is part has supported the opposition since independence. Being part of the opposition is inherent to the social fabric. He built houses in his village and became a person of note in the chiefdom and, as the son of a former chief, he was powerful in the village. He married his fourth (much younger) wife. His wish was probably to have more children as the rules of this community dictate. His tomb on top of the hill is a sign of his power and of his desire to be part of the village, but it is also something he could never have escaped: a Grassfielder is buried at home!

His favourite wife also returned to the village, though much later, after retiring, and she took up village and church life as her vocation. Her husband's village is not her village but she integrated into it as is expected of a good wife. In the village she takes care of the needy and has become a well-respected woman. After the death of her husband, she continued to live in the village with the younger wife. She is very often in town, where she stays with her eldest daughter. When I first met her in 2008 she did not use the phone much as her children kept her up to date. Today, however, she uses her phone frequently and is as well informed about her children abroad as her daughter is. The past few years she has also travelled to visit her children, and the photo albums of her travels to South Africa and the US are witness to this. She fully supports their decisions to go abroad. In Cameroon it is difficult to have a good future without diplomas but the fact that her sons are illegal immigrants and do not have good career prospects seems not to have altered her views. She receives calls from them and also money from time to time. Her sons help her out when she is in hospital and life goes on as if they were present. Nevertheless she says she misses them but life is too busy for her to dwell on such thoughts.

Conclusion

Mobile telephony and communication via the internet play an important role in the lives of this dispersed family from Cameroon but beneath these apparent drastic changes is a basic 'grammar' of communication that refers to values and norms in society that have been there for a long time. After all, the family structure, the perceptions of roles, the exchanges of support and information have not changed fundamentally. The differences are more to be found in the reasons for moving, that is, from state-steered movement to economically driven movement; but again the basic idea of moving away and looking for a better job and income elsewhere has always been there. After all, the conjuncture we

are at is not as 'vital' as it seems at first sight. Nevertheless we should not underestimate changes but these are rather in the speed of communication and decreasing distances than in content as far as family relations and feelings of belonging are concerned. Instead of rupture, the dispersed communities are experiencing a period of connectivity and (re) celebration of belonging, thus reinforcing the social fabric despite the physical distances involved. The example of the eldest son living abroad but still managing to be his father's successor is a good example of this. Thus the 'vitality' of the conjuncture between moments of increasing mobility and easy access to communication is the increasing tightness or closeness, that is, the glue, between the members of a mobile community for whom national borders are a nuisance that can be overcome. Distance is no longer an issue.

Vuorela (2002) defines such mobile constellations as transnational habitus, which would mean that people who live around the world are very much involved in similar normative frames and rules in their daily lives and have shared emotions. It relates the construction of (shared) identities to the social, to relating and belonging. These connections are filled with roles of obligation, exchange and expectations that are constantly symbolized by contact via the mobile phone (H. Nyamnjoh, 2013). People 'belong' to these networks and are willing to play the roles expected of them. The concept of habitus instead emphasizes continuity and not so much social change, as was suggested by the idea of conjuncture. Both however are part of the truth.

Compared to the family's past itineraries, geographical distances have changed tremendously. However the distance between their home village and the small towns at the border and in the south of Cameroon might have been as far in the perceptions of people in the 1970s and 1980s as the US and UK are today. The image of distance is informed by the realities of communication technologies. The car in the past made it possible to accept distances as mobile telephony does today. Indeed, mobility and communication technology are closely linked: the combination makes mobile communities a reality. Instead of a rupture with the past, this case study has shown continuity for the people involved in this dynamic of mobility and communication. The family's international life is a matter of enlarged space in which the community defines itself. It is not so much a change in the dynamics of belonging and social fabric. Instead, mobile telephony has strengthened the glue of society.

On the other hand, the elements that are glued together constitute a new phenomenon in our world that fits the concept of 'global shadows'. Ferguson (2006) explains these shadows as the formation of communities over national borders stretching across the world in the often unrecognized (illegal/illicit) social spaces. This is true for some of the family members described above and probably also for the youngest sister, whose story I only heard through the accounts of her siblings and mother. Her tuition fees were paid by an influential industrial organization that now expects her to stay and work for them to pay back their investment. This is another side to life in the shadows of the world. Thus the decisions of the family members to go out and be connected are probably less of a change in feelings and emotions for the families involved but this time it is on a global scale and with divisions between social spaces.

This article has spelt out the mobility and communication of one family that I have followed in their itineraries since 2008, and since 1979 with the help of historical

accounts. This detailed account shows dynamics that cannot be revealed through a quantitative approach. An article such as this offers only limited space and we are increasingly forced to summarize our data. It was my aim to show people's lives and to offer a complete picture of the realities as they are being lived today. In this case, it is the story of an average, middle-class family that defines its home as a small village in North West Cameroon. They are at the same time world citizens, though they are not yet allowed to participate fully in this wider world.

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Notes

1. For information on the Mobile Africa Revisited programme from which this article derives, see: <https://mobileafricarevisited.wordpress.com>.
2. The people who are cited and whose lives I describe in this article are well aware of the research I am doing and agreed to their personal stories being used. I have however changed their names. To change the geography of their travels and connections would have made the story incomprehensible so it is possible that people may recognize those whose stories are described in the article. Nevertheless I have avoided mentioning the name of the main town and the village and kingdom of this family.
3. I was able to collect over 50 pictures of the family's history (hidden in different corners of the houses) and a diary kept by the father in which the family's visits and activities are recorded. Today these types of materials are stored on his sons' computers.
4. MTN, a South African telephone company; Orange, a French telephone company.
5. The exchange rate was 1 euro = FCFA 655.
6. See: www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/material/excel/2010/MobileCellularSubscriptions00-10.xls Statistical data on mobile phone penetration are given at the level of the state and do not consider variations between locations or social groups. Nevertheless, these figures do give an impression of the development of telecommunications in the study region.
7. Pictures were found in the family albums, and encounters during these travels and meetings were described by the youngest son during our trip and later recalled by the other sons and daughters when I showed them the photo album of the pictures we took while following the itinerary of the father. The diary also offers a record of the family's travels as the father travelled for work and between his different wives, who lived in various places. (For more explanation, see de Bruijn and Brinkman, 2012.)
8. He was my student in the African Studies Department.
9. I have never met the youngest sister, who lives in the US, but have talked to her on the phone and followed her through the stories told by her brothers and other family members.

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