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Kfaang and its technologies : towards a social history of mobility in Kom, Cameroon, 1928-1998

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Background and methodology

Introduction

According to Thomas (2002: 272), 'the importance and significance of methodology lies in the fact that the issue of what is studied is intimately connected with the question of how it is studied'. This chapter discusses the methods employed in the research. A range of different sources was used in the completion of this study in the belief that historical sources contain a greater or lesser degree of subjective partiality. To achieve greater objectivity, a combination of sources and methods is necessary. These sources included materials found in the archives both in Cameroon and Europe, photographs and oral interviews. The chapter starts with the writer's own approach to the writing of history. Secondly, it situates the study area. Thirdly, it examines what has been written about the history of the Bamenda Grasslands and Kom.

Proposed history writing

The history that has been written here is a social history defined as the study of the changes in the patterns of daily life of a group of people with the emphasis on how the subjects of the study lived with respect to music, dance, marriage, architecture, family life and so on, and the changes occurring over a period of time. The focus of this type of history is to uncover patterns of continuity and change (Hobsbawm, 1971: 24; Ajayi, 1980: 33-40). The attempt here is to understand African history from the perspective of the daily lives of Africans, using Kom as an example; and specifically, how mobility and *kfaang* affected the daily lives of the Kom. One source of inspiration was the work of Stephen Ellis (2002: 25). At one point Ellis cites the celebrated British historian-philosopher, R.G. Collingwood, who maintained that 'the work of a historian is the effort to penetrate the thinking of those who were implicated in the events of the past'. Ellis concludes that '(...) perhaps, one should think less in terms of African history and more in terms of world history in which Africa has its part. All the labels on periods are *ex post facto* (...) Africa should not be thought of in terms of timelessness'. In other words, Ellis argues that there should be an attempt to present and date African histories according to the way the Africans themselves saw it. From that perspective, European periodisation with its terminology of interwar, post-war, post-independence, pre-colonial, modernisation, industrialization, colonial and post-colonial can often be simply irrelevant to the subject of study. Therefore, those terminologies will only occasionally

appear in this thesis. The overall ambition of such an approach is to contribute to the local history of the region (Harniet-Sievers, 2008).

In dealing with this type of history, we go nearer to the people without a public voice as opposed to those individuals who held the reins of power and were at one time at the centre of politics. This meant dealing with the ‘voices of the voiceless’ (Gam Nkwi, 2010), and writing the history by giving priority to the oral informants. Inspiration was also drawn from three scholars. First, Touraine (1974) whose concept of historicity is the ability of the community to provide an orientation and transform itself in the process, as well as his model of talking about a people’s history as they see it. Second Harniet Sievers *et al.* (1997 and 2002), maintain that the history of the voiceless is an attempt to write the history from the perspective of non -officials. Drawing inspiration from Cohen (2004: 6), it was felt that ‘the informants should speak for themselves’. Finally, Ranger (2000), Illiffe, (1987) and Feierman (1990) provide historians of Africa with a model of the kind of research that has to be done in Africa. They urge that in writing the history of the African continent it is important to use the sources actually found there, in particular oral tradition (Ranger, 2000). Here, an attempt has been made not only to use these sources but also to write a history which accords with the people’s own testimony.

A brief description of the fieldwork region

The Fondom of Kom is located in the Bamenda Grasslands in the present-day North-west Region of Cameroon. It is the second largest Fondom, after Nso, in the Grasslands (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967: 33). Kom shares its eastern boundary with the kingdoms of Oku and Nso and the southern frontier with Kedjom Keku or Big Babanki and Ndop plain. Bafut is on the Western border while to the north is found Bum and Mmen.

Politics in the Bamenda Grasslands is dominated and organised around the Fondoms ruled by Fons. These Fondoms, in general, grew out of conquest and the politics of inclusion and exclusion through warfare which led to the subjection of weaker neighbours. They were dominated by political and social hierarchies based on kinship/kinship and lineages, on social and political status. Most studies have focused on the Fondoms and on the establishment of political hegemony through social organisations (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967; Rowlands, 1979; Dillon, 1990).

In terms of development, Kom and the other parts of the Bamenda Grasslands have not benefited much from government development projects. It has thus remained on the fringes of what Veena & Poole (2004: 1) call ‘the margins of the state’. By that phrase they simply refer to areas which are often depicted as being neglected or subordinate, and that marginality is compounded by geography, economy, society and politics. The people of those areas also see themselves as neglected by the state. The contradiction of those marginal areas is that although the term ‘marginal’ might sometimes suggest ‘cut off’ or isolated, the people living in those areas have also been part of the state and geographical mobility links them to the affairs of the state although in a limited way (de Bruijn, 2010: 167-191). Kom Fondom is one example of such areas in the Bamenda Grasslands.

Kom Fondom is believed to have been founded about the mid-19th century. It includes sub-chiefdoms which were incorporated into Kom proper as ‘vassal states’ by

Map 2.1 The position of Kom in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon

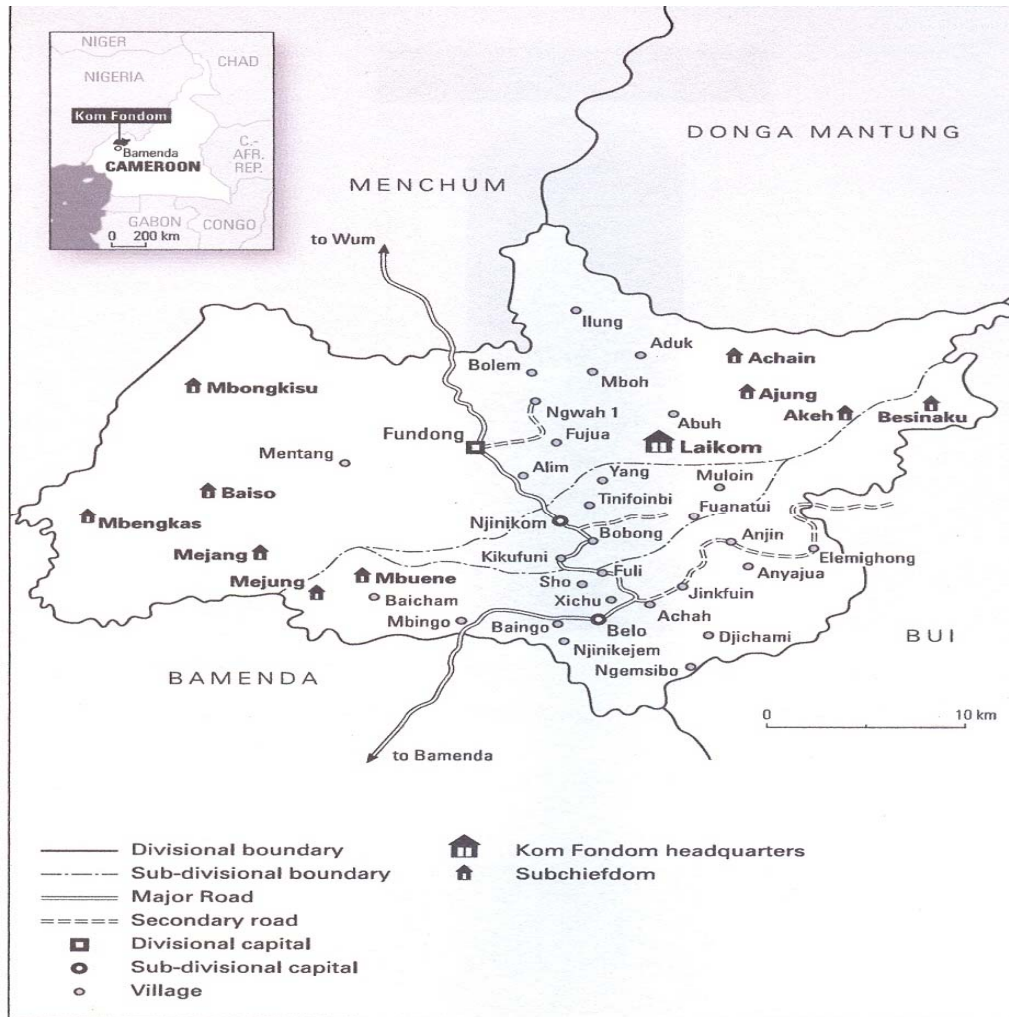


Source: Aaron S. Neba, 1987, *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon*, 2nd ed. (Bamenda: Neba Publishers), 15.

Fon Yuh (c. 1865-1912), the seventh ruler of Kom. These tributary chiefdoms included Achain, Ake, Ajung, Mbesinaku, Mbueni, Baiso, Baicham, Mejang, Mbengkas & Mejung (Chilver, 1981: 457; Nkwi & Warnier, 1982: 65-68).

This study is concerned with Kom proper or central Kom, although reference will be occasionally made to the tributary chiefdoms that constitute the greater Fondom. Secondly, it considers Kom communities outside Kom, especially in Bamenda, which was the first place which Kom people expressed their 'Komness' beyond their area of origin. These communities were founded as a result of the spatial mobility of Kom people in their attempt to sustain 'Komness'. According to their oral traditions, the ancestors of the Kom migrated from Ndobo in North Cameroon with other Tikar groups, to Babessi where they settled temporarily. A popular legend recounts their movement from Babessi to their present settlement. It states that while Kom people were at Babessi, their presence was seen as threatening. The King of Babessi therefore devised a trick to eliminate them.

Map 2.2 Kom Fandom showing its villages and sub-chiefdoms



Source: Chilver & Kaberry, 1967, 'The Kingdom of Kom in West Cameroon', p. 126.

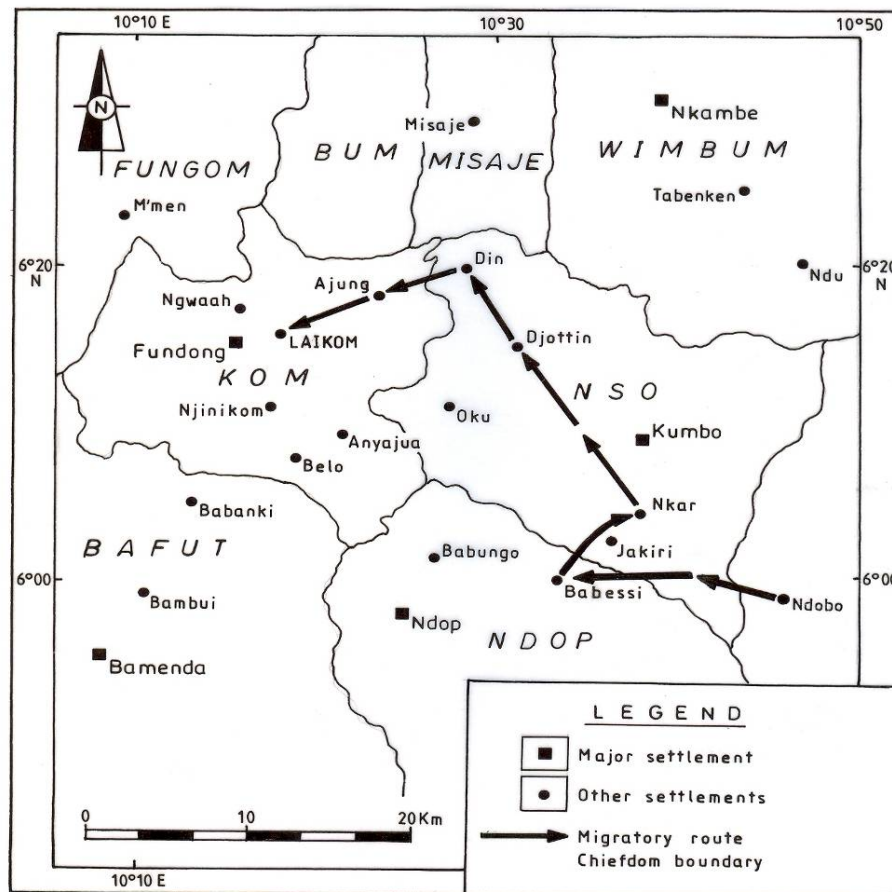
One day the king of Babessi told the Fon of Kom that some of their people were becoming obstinate and might cause a war between the two groups. He therefore proposed that they should each build a house in which the trouble makers would be burnt. The Fon of Kom, Muni, agreed to the plan and the houses were constructed accordingly. But while the king of Babessi constructed his house with two doors, the naive Muni built his own house according to what was agreed, with only one door. After locking the front doors, the houses were set ablaze. The Babessi people escaped through the second door while Kom people were burnt to death. This trick reduced the size of the Kom population in Babessi and made the Fon of Kom very angry.

Oral tradition further states that in his anger and frustration, Muni promised his remnant wives and sisters that he would avenge the death of his people. He told them that he would hang himself on a tree in a nearby forest and on that spot a lake would emerge and all the maggots from his decomposing body would *turn* into fish there. The lake was discovered by a Babessi hunter and immediately reported to the palace. A royal fishing expedition was organised. At the peak of the fishing the lake 'somer-

saulted' or turned upside down and all the Babessi people present drowned. Following Muni's instructions a python's track, believed to be the incarnated Fon, led Kom people from Babessi to Nkar and Idien in the present day Bui Division of Northwest Province.

At Idien they settled near a stream beside a raffia bush. There, the Queen Mother, Tih, bore a son who was to be the next king. That son was called Jingjua, meaning 'suffering'. She also gave birth to Nange Tih, future mother of the *Ikui* clan, Nakhinti Tih, future mother of *Itinalah* and Ndzitewa Tih, future mother of the *Achaff* clan.¹ Once the python trail reappeared Kom people left Idien for Ajung where the python's trail disappeared again. At Ajung the Fon of Ajung married Nangeh Tih and bore Jinabo, Nangebo, Nyanga and Bi. After a while the python's track reappeared and Kom people left again for Laikom.² From Idien, the trekkers moved through the Ijim forest to Laikom where the python disappeared. Map 2.3 shows the migratory routes.

Map 2.3 Migratory routes of Kom people to their present site



Source: Compiled by the author from oral sources.

¹ The Ikwi, Itinalah and Achaff are seen as the founding clans of Kom because the three people who arrived in Laikom occupied three geographical cardinal points.

² Interview with the Royal Highness, Fon Vincent Yuh of Kom Fondom, Laikom, Kom 14 June 2008.

It was in Kom that the research ideas for this thesis matured. Clearly it was necessary to interrogate the sense of Kom geographical location and the cultural identity of its people. In a world of flexible and ever-increasing technologies of mobility and cultural encounters that is informed by what Gupta and Ferguson (1992) call ‘interconnecting local and global hierarchies’, cultural identities cannot be bounded and so the questions arose: where is Kom in this globalised world? Who are Kom people? Kom identity thus became a central concern. Was it more or less static over time? Or was it rather a political and social construction, a cultural identity as a work in progress? In this sense Kom cultural identity would therefore be fluid, an imagined reality, to borrow from Anderson (1983).

But on the face of it geographical Kom appeared to be bounded. Yet as the research progressed it appeared clearer that the location of Kom seemed more and more plural and that space was becoming difference. In other words, as Kom people moved out of Kom they recreated their home in distant places which was not the same as the original one because geographical space had changed. Yet they created social space. Writing about space as difference, Ferguson & Gupta (1992: 6-7) stated *inter alia*:

(...) there is need to give up naïve ideas of communities as literal entities, there is equally need to remain sensitive to the profound bifocality that characterises locally lived lives in a globally interconnected world, and the powerful role of place in the near view of lived experience. These changes notwithstanding, it would be wrong simply to dismiss space as imaginary, but quite constructive to focus on the ways in which space is imagined to explore the relation between place and space as socially constructed reality. Territoriality is thus reinscribed at just the point it threatens to be erased (...) Physical location and physical territory, for so long the only grid on which cultural difference could be mapped, need to be replaced (...).

In other words, because of the way the world has become interconnected, social scientists need to give up the notion that they are necessarily dealing with fixed, absolute physical spaces. In the past these ‘spaces’ have been used as the only measure of cultural practices and difference. Yet because the world is made up of movements of people in which it has become ‘globalised’, that type of naïve thinking needs to be given up.

Kom therefore was more complex as a ‘geographical expression’. Of course, it was in one sense a fixed geographically bounded place – but not only that. With that realization of Kom as also a social and political construct, it was necessary to give up pre-conceptions. We had fallen prey to that but after the first draft and continuous questioning we came to understand the contrary. To undertake a scientific enquiry it was incumbent to approach the research site as a neutral one rather than the other way round. When does one define the subject and object of his/her research? Should it be before, during or after the research? After the first draft it was realized that it is important to define the research place after the research. However, Kom and the Bamenda Grasslands had benefited from various studies in the past, and the next section will turn to the type of historiography and history which has been written so far.

Kom in the history and historiography of the Bamenda Grasslands

The story of Benedicta and other informants shows that very little existed in the historiography of Kom with regards to the way Kom people saw and understood their history. Thus, the masses were ignored. Indeed the historiography of Kom has been *a terra incognita*. It does not mean that nothing has been written on Kom but rather that Kom has not been at the centre-stage in historical research. Its history remains sketchily

written in articles, books and mimeographs. According to Vubo (2001: 112), a balanced study of any Grasslands community would be incomplete if it neglected Kom relations to other communities with which they formed what Kopytoff (1973: 371), calls an *ecumene*. Generally, Odhiambo (2004: 6) has informed us that the written sources of African history belong to three traditions:

The first corpus belongs to the Muslim sources from the eighth to the fifteen centuries and was mostly written by Islamic scholars, travellers and missionaries. The sources were generally biased in favour of Muslim rulers and communities and when they treated any unbelievers they condemned them.

The second corpus of written sources was dominated by European travellers and traders whose accounts of Africa dated from the fifteenth Century. They were not so different from the traditional representation of Africa. These European travellers portrayed Africa and Africans as primitive and always fighting against each other.

The third corpus consisted of colonial historiography produced essentially by the Europeans with their own knowledge of Africa. This colonial historiography was based on the premise of European superiority and a civilizing mission inspired by the evolutionary theory. According to the theory, Europeans were to bring civilization to those who did not have it. Colonial historiography therefore presented the Europeans as the actors in any significant transformation of the African continent. 'The Africans were seen by the administrators, missionaries, historians and the anthropologists alike as being static and primitive, the passive recipients of European "progress". Africa's self-evident achievement, its historic monuments, its polities that resembled Western states and its complex religious institutions were attributed to foreigners, the Hamitic conquerors of North East Africa' (Odhiambo, 2004: 6). It is this third tradition which fits the historiography of the Bamenda Grasslands and Kom.

The history of the Bamenda Grasslands was first written in ethnographic mimeographs by the first colonial anthropologists. They were employed to do so by the colonial regimes so that the people could be easily understood, pacified and governed. Some of these reports were grossly inadequate, some were misleading and yet others were described and understood in colonial language as 'primitive societies', 'natives', 'tribes', 'acephalous societies' or 'stateless societies'. By the middle of the 20th Century, the growing movements of people and state formation attracted a new breed of scholars. For instance, Rowlands (1979: 1-19) and Warnier (1984, 1993, 2007) attributed the movement and instability that was a major characteristic of the region to slave dealing in most of the nineteenth Century Grasslands. Their studies were limited in time scope only to the nineteenth century but they acted as pointers towards developments that were occurring within the larger development of the world capitalist economy. Their works also show that much mobility was experienced in the Bamenda Grasslands. This was principally because of trade – especially the slave trade – a point much reiterated by Kopytoff (1973) in his studies of Aghem.

Ekeh (1986) went further and attributed to the slave trade the integration of especially Sub-Saharan Africa into the world economy. Warnier (1984), demonstrates that underdevelopment did not start with industrial capitalism but that it is rooted in the origin of exchange itself in which the slave trade was prominent. Scholars like Chilver (1961 and 1963), Curtin & Vansina (1964) and Austen (1999) strongly support the view that the Bamenda Grasslands were linked to the Atlantic coast as early as the eighteenth century by the slave trade. This study is strongly influenced by these views especially because they question the globalisation myth according to which Africa has only re-

cently become part of the world system. The case of the Bamenda Grasslands and Kom only shows that the sub-region became part of global development, especially from at least the middle of the nineteenth century. It is also indirectly influenced by their views about early mobility of people in the sub-region.

Chilver (1966) notes how Zingtgraff wrote about Kom warriors who were prepared to fight in an instant. Bruens (1942), a Catholic missionary, published a description of the Kom language. 'The Structure of Nkom and its relations to the Bantu and Sudanic Languages' (Jeffreys, 1951) describes Kom and their traditions of origins. In 1952 he wrote about the Fon of Kom in 'Some Notes on the Fon of Bikom' in which he described the traditional hierarchy in Kom. In 1959 he commented on Kom again and focused on the blacksmiths and the origin and methods of smelting iron. In all these the authors have largely ignored the place of mobility in Kom. Implicitly, there were movements going on in the region as indicated by blacksmiths who had to sell their produce to neighbouring Fondoms.

Chilver (1961) examines some of the patterns of pre-colonial mobility in Kom, including those who were great traders, and travelled long distances for days and weeks. Kom people were the middlemen between Bum and Mankon and specialised in selling locally dyed cloth known today in the region as Bikom cloth. Chilver & Kaberry (1967), traced the origins of Kom expansion and Kom hegemony in the sub-region under Fon Yuh I. Jua (2002) examines the politics of Njinikom in relation to the village development association, Njinikom Area Development Association (NADA) and also showing how Kom became linked to the world capitalist system. Other scholars have dealt with the women's revolt which took place in Kom in 1958. (Ritzenthaler, 1960; Nkwi, 1976 and 1985; de Vries, 1998; Gam Nkwi, 2003). Others like Nkwi (1995) & Shanklin (1995) have studied slavery in Kom. The above works, although excellent, do not pursue the history of Kom from the perspective of mobility, technology and social hierarchies. This work therefore attempts to fill that gap.

Nkwi (1976) showed the dynamics of change in traditional Kom. Nkwi and Warnier (1982) surveyed the sources for historical reconstruction available in the Bamenda Grasslands and also the various indigenous groups found in the area and its socio-political organisation. Kom was treated in relation to its origin and migration to its present site. Nkwi (1982) examines how royal slaves and dynastic marriages were conducted in the Grasslands region during the pre-colonial period. He further illuminates the movements of people in the region. In (1989), he focused on the early German colonial rule in Cameroon and the effective establishment of Bamenda *Bezirk*. He also examines the Germano-Kom war of 1904-1905. Nkwi (1997), sketches the background – both national and local – to the establishment of NADA, its structure and its steady loss of grassroots support after 1990. All these works again indirectly touched on mobility. Their relevance to this thesis is not in doubt. The works shows how Kom and Grassland mobility was motivated by the developments in a larger world setting. Perhaps, understandably, these studies stop short of showing the link between ICTs and social hierarchies.

The works were generally framed against different backgrounds and were coloured by those backgrounds. They are the efforts of anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. After reading them one gets the impression that the scholars wrote from the position of those who wielded power. They dealt with those who handled power in traditional and colonial Kom society. Nkwi's work touched on Christianity, education, and movement of people in Kom but most, if not all his informants were elites in Kom

society. De Vries (1998) was also ‘enticed’ by working with informants whose voices had been loudly heard in scholarly debates. Above all, these attempts also stopped short of writing the history of the area according to the way the people themselves perceived and understood it.

These are only a few of the scholars who have done work in the Bamenda Grasslands. Their importance here is that they laid the foundation for future scholarship. If their works were of limited relevance for this study it was so because of their disciplines and the methodologies which they used. They were archaeologists, anthropologists and sociologists. Curtin & Vansina stood out as historians but the Bamenda Grasslands appear in their works only in passing. Generally, the history of the Grasslands has over the years received various types of attention as shown above. The mobility of people has been one of the frequent themes of that story as shown by Warnier and Rowlands. Yet it has not been a direct study by the above authors. Consequently, there has been no attempt before now to study in detail the interaction between mobility, technology and social hierarchies.

The scholars mentioned above only indirectly studied what has been directly examined in this thesis. Even when the work was anthropological there were some key informants who were never contacted during field work by these authors. Kom history has largely depended on anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. This thesis has built on these anthropological works and has given it an historical perspective. Klein (1972: 16) informs us that ‘what defines the historian is the belief that things can be understood more fully if we understand how they came into being. Social phenomena are too important to be left to other social scientists’. Echoing Klein, to grasp social phenomenon fully, a combination of social science and history is needed.

Fieldwork: The archives in Cameroon and Europe

The National Archives, Buea (NAB), Cameroon

The NAB was established in 1959 through the efforts of two British Anthropologists: Edwin and Shirley Ardener. (For more documentation of this archive see, Orosz, 1996 & Austen, 1974). The archives building in Buea holds more than 20,000 files which are not stored in the best of conditions. Consequently, some of the files have been destroyed by rats as shown in the photo below.

Despite the fact that some of the files were destroyed, numerous files which were mostly written by the British Colonial Administration were consulted. They were: Assessment, Intelligence and Annual Reports of various administrative divisions submitted by Divisional Officers (DOs) to the office of the League of Nations and United Nations both on Kom and the Bamenda Grasslands. They touched on issues like roads, education, Christianity, and mobility and covered the period 1916-1961. However, for the years 1918-1948 there were more files because during that period the British colonial administration was being consolidated in the territory. The information was compiled by British authorities for administrative purposes.

Colonial classification of archives was an added hurdle. Their euro-centric language – ‘tribe’, ‘primitive’, to mention only a few of the terms – coloured most of the files because the sense remained to be deciphered by the reader (Stoler, 2009: 11). It was also difficult to decipher most if not all the abbreviations used in the files. That notwithstanding, on the whole it is worthy to note that the archival records remained one of



Photo 2.1 Destroyed files in the Buea archives [photo by author]



Photo 2.2 Bales of papers in the Bamenda provincial archives [photo by author]

the most useful bases for further investigation and analysis for this thesis. The importance of archival records was echoed by Williamson (2000: 1), for the Gold Coast. He maintained that, at both local and provincial districts, reports were essential since it was generally assumed that the colonial official was the first to keep written records for the specific area. It was therefore only in the keeping of records that subsequent administrators would have a sense of the territory. Although his focus was on the Gold Coast, Williamson also said what was true of the Gold Coast was also true of the British Cameroon. Records were vital for the colonial administrator at all levels, district, division and province, for effective administration.

The Bamenda provincial archives, Cameroon

The Bamenda Provincial Archive is found in the Bamenda Station. Most of the files appeared not classified as they were parcelled up and kept under the tables as shown in the photo below.

However, many files were consulted. These files had relevant information on road communication, tours and visits of the District Officers, Residents and messengers on and the growth of population in various divisions of the region including Kom

Personal papers collections, Cameroon

Personal or private archives as used here were not really archives in the strict sense that they were intended for future consultation and research. Generally 'private archives can occasionally provide the most extensive sources for research in local history although in some cases they might be symbols of prestige to the rich and powerful people' (Thomas, 1998: 429). This view seems to argue that private archives are kept only by the powerful and wealthy in society. But 'small' people at lower rungs of the society also have their 'archives', as this work will show.

Private archives, therefore are those created by individuals and are not opened to the public. They hosted mostly correspondence and letters which the individual had with colonial government, missionaries and friends. The strength of such archives is the fact that what is found there is not available elsewhere. Private archives include such collections as the parish archive in Njinikom, St. Anthony's School in Njinikom, and Chief Anyway Ndichia Timti's documents. The information they provide is useful since it is about the local situation. The content of the files includes such matters as the school attendance register, new Kom people who became teachers, the visitor reports and the constant transfer of the teachers and the pupils.

Mr. Anyway was one exceptional case of Kom people who had moved to the coastal plantations in the late 1940s. His papers were collected by his brother, Ivo Nkwain. While on the coast he admired western education although he had never been to school, and decided to open a school in his village, Fundong. In the previous chapter we narrated how the school was constructed in 1951 and in 1952 and that he paid the salary of the teachers and school fees of pupils. He also handed over the school to the missionaries but continued to help them financially. Missionaries compiled reports on how the money was spent. Chief Anyway wrote to the colonial education authorities urging them to open more schools in the Kom area. All the correspondence between him, the missionaries and colonial education authorities are found in his archives.

Parish archives, Njinikom, Cameroon

The Njinikom parish archives combines documents from the St. Anthony's Primary School Archives and the mission parish archives. These two institutions provided in-

formation about the local situation. The school and the church, all found in Njinikom, constitute technologies which were key factors in the geographical and social mobility of Kom people beginning in 1928. St. Anthony's Primary School archive contains information about various hierarchies and social mobility. It provides evidence about the number of Kom people, both females and males, who appropriated the school and those who became the pioneer teachers. They also showed how their access to schooling influenced their spatial and social mobility.

It cannot really be said that these archives are without problems. The 'sacred returns', files which contained the total number of catechumens and Christians found in a parish in a year which would have shown the number of catechumens and Christians found in the Njinikom mission, had been removed to Buea, which was the headquarters of the Vicariate before the creation of the Bamenda diocese in 1971. To consult these files in the archive in the Bishop's house, Small Soppo, Buea was a difficult task. The Bishop's secretary told me in a stern and firm manner that, 'It is the tradition of the church not to open her sacred returns to the public'.

Public Records Office (PRO), Kew Gardens, London

The PRO is the hub of British reports and correspondence within the British Empire and the Commonwealth. Kom as part of the British Southern Cameroons was part of the empire. Consequently, there were files on Kom and Bamenda Grasslands although they only covered limited time periods and themes. Most of them dated from the 1950s and dealt largely with political issues. But some of them dealt with transport, roads, and the presence of the Mill Hill missionaries.

The archival content reflected the views of the colonial and mission administrators. Despite their shortcomings and evident subjectivity, Whiteman (1983) has shown that the archives provide copious information.

Mission 21 Archives, Basel, Switzerland

The archives of Mission 21 of Basel Mission, Basel, contain historical photographs, written records, printed and hand-drawn maps. This collection was a very important resource for research in church history, social and cultural anthropology, geography, and environmental sciences. The photographs date from the early years to the middle of the 20th century, including 28,400 of the more digitally accessible. They were taken in the historical Basel Mission fields in Africa and Asia, with a principal focus on Ghana, Cameroon, South India (mainly Karnataka and Kerala), South China (mainly Hakka-speaking parts of the Guangdong province and Hong Kong), and Kalimantan.³

Most of the files in Mission 21 archives were in German and my knowledge of German was non-existent. Maps were consulted and the most important was the map of Bamenda Province in 1949 provided by Reto Bieri who worked in the cartographic section. The importance of the maps lay in the fact they showed both the footpaths and the motorable roads then in use. Secondly, the maps showed the various patterns of mobility in the entire Bamenda Grasslands.

Archival photographs

These photographs were collected when Presbyterian and Catholic missionaries first arrived in the Bamenda Grasslands. According to Jenkins & Geary (1985: 56-57), 'The photographs were a means of depicting the conditions encountered in foreign lands and

³ Discussion with Guy Thomas, Basel, 19 May 2008. He was the head of the archives.

were added to the annual mission station reports to illustrate the growth of the stations, the schools and the congregations. Above all, photos were taken to appear in the literature issued to supporters who were based at home'. In all, a total of 268 photographs showed how the early missionaries influenced mobility and technologies in the Bamenda Grasslands. They are important to this work because some of them captured the circumstances vividly and are identified with captions, dates and photographer's name.

Apart from the articles, and files there were also a collection of photographs both private and public, in the homes of informants.

Photographs from family albums

Some photographs have proved useful for this thesis. Photographs can tell more than words. Scholars like Hartman et al. (1998) and Pinney (2004) maintain that only recently have visual sources, especially photographs, become important tools as complements and alternatives to the written word. Kratz (1994) claims that the value of photographs is also determined by the fact that

Most researchers of Africa's social history have had limited interaction with photographs. Indeed until now the most common location of photographs in theses on Namibian and wider African history is on their covers. They might also have been included marginally within the text in order to provide a feel or atmosphere for the period, to identify a person or place, or simply because of their outright quaintness.

Thus, in the photographs found in family albums, on walls and tables, informants could be seen celebrating memories. They point to photographs showing when they were in Lagos, or in Bamenda or in Victoria with friends and relatives. As Edwards (2004: 4), points out, photographs were not disembodied images but rather inscriptions which relate to people, their sense of themselves and their past. Photographs therefore depict, by their very nature, social relations and the way in which people actually tell histories. In the contexts of telling stories, photographs as objects become enmeshed in the web of the oral, linked to sound, gesture, social body and music; sitting around, passing the photographs from one to another, perhaps in ways that express traditional social relations of history telling.

Family photo albums constitute one of the social repertoires in Cameroon but the use of these albums in the Bamenda Grasslands is quite intriguing. In Kom homes the first thing a visitor is given is a family album. In certain homes the photo albums are displayed on the walls of the sitting room. These albums have over the years escaped the attention of researchers at least in Kom and the Bamenda Grasslands. What is their importance? Why do the people conserve them? Could albums be sources of history? Who was behind the production of these photos? Where, when and why? What do these photos represent? These questions need further research.

One of the probable reasons for albums is that they show within a very short time the many years that have elapsed in people's lives, and make them nostalgic about their mobile past. Even their itineraries were reflected in these albums, as well as the new artefacts that accompanied their mobility. One could get a quicker sense of who somebody used to be a few years back or 'long ago'. Of course, family photo albums cannot tell a complete photo of somebody or something or a period. People tend to select what they want others to see and feel good about them. However, if carefully used, photos could be another source of history, despite the shortcomings, because they could identify the time and events surrounding its production (Geary, 1986: 89-116).

These photo albums were different from the photos that were obtained in the archives. The archival photos used in this thesis were ‘quiet photos’, meaning that you could not see and feel the people talk to you; hence the images could only be recognised through what was written about them. The photo albums in houses could be described by those who kept them. More often than not, albums and photos are seen as elite objects. In Kom, this is not the case. Photos are found almost in every home irrespective of status but not everybody was prepared to allow us made use of them. There were other things around the photographs which we could deduce from observation.

Photographs from informants also differed from those in the archives with regard to time-spans. Archival photographs portrayed the situation in the early 1920s. As already mentioned elsewhere most of the archival photographs were obtained from the Basel Mission 21 archives. While in Kom as much effort as possible was taken to view the private photo albums of the informants. Through the photographs more information was also captured on individuals who appropriated the technology. The first Kom photographer, Cosmas Nchouji, showed us the photo of the first car bought by a Kom man in 1955, and indicated that most of the people in the photograph had died. It was important to interview the widow of the man who bought the car. In our first meeting with her in February 2008 she turned down my request to talk to her about her late husband’s car. A second meeting in April 2008 was unsuccessful because she was seriously ill. In a third meeting in late June 2008 she told us the story of how her husband came to buy a car and the fascination and sensation it caused in Njinikom in June 1955. Unfortunately most of the people in the photograph except Michael Mbeng had long died.

The photographs revealed more than the narratives and archives. For example, they were a separate repository and source. They, like any other source had their limitations and ‘require just as much scrutiny and critical interpretation as written sources’ (Jenkins & Geary, 1985: 63). But photographs are also very compelling. They are force of command. They command the eye and create more sensations in the viewer than the written narrative. The last photographs used in this thesis were taken by the researcher to illustrate a point. Although amateurish as they are, they help to tell the story.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings, of the archives and photographs, their use in historical reconstruction is indispensable although it involves a critical reading of files and a careful examination of photographs. It is not an exaggeration to say that the biases in the content of files might sometimes lead us to wrong interpretations. The voices of most informants have been rarely represented in these files and sometimes when some are traced they are distorted, with some speaking, literally and figuratively, the language of the colonial power (see Cherniavsky, 1996: 85-110; Ergene, 1998: 29-43). This was particularly the case of those who attained elementary and formal education. In Kom social context they were those who appropriated the new technology and therefore formed a new social hierarchy. Women were absent and most of the time they were dismissed or only briefly mentioned in migration literature.

But it was important to know the role of these women in education, mobility, Christianity and ultimately in the social transformation of Kom. It is in an attempt to lean on these people that interviews became vital in the broadest way possible. This approach recalled Vansina’s (1989: xi) statement that: ‘it is no consolation to be told by others that, because there are no written records, no past can be recovered, as if living traces of that past were not part and parcel of daily life’.

Maps

We found the use of maps very helpful. Maps could be used to plot the itineraries of informants. They also aid understanding of social processes in time and space. Some maps again were secondary sources. A map offers a reader a visual dimension of analysis. One of its particular advantages is that it conveys non-linear and simultaneous knowledge. At a single glance a map, can tell what is going on in a particular region in time. Because of these compelling forces maps can be important sources for constructing the past (de Bruijn and Gam Nkwi, 2011 forthcoming). Since the central concern of this study was the relation between mobility patterns and the introduction of communication technologies over the past century in the Bamenda Grasslands with special focus on Kom, communication maps showing mobility itineraries were used to understand how they have influenced and shaped each other.

Fieldwork: Oral traditions in Kom

The importance of oral tradition, in societies without writing cannot be overemphasized. The information transmitted verbally fills the gaps in the archival sources. As Ki-Zerbo (1990: 3) points out,

Oral tradition takes its place as a real living museum, conservator and transmitter of the social and cultural creations stored up by people said to have no written records (...) Oral tradition is by far the most intimate of historical sources, the most rich, the one which is fullest of the sap of authenticity ... However useful the written record, it is bound to freeze, to dry up its subject. It decants, dissects, schematizes, and petrifies: the letter killeth. Tradition clothes things in the flesh and blood and colour, it gives blood to the skeleton of the past. It presents in three dimensions what is often crowded on to the two dimensional surface of a piece of paper.

Although Ki-Zerbo was so particular about oral tradition it should be noted that it has its own limitations which he was careful to point out. According to him, ‘this spoken history is a very frail thread (...) which we use to trace our way back through the dark twists of the labyrinth of time’. He added: ‘Those who are its custodians are hoary-headed old men with cracked voices, memories often dim, and a stickler’s insistence on etiquette as behoves potential ancestors’. He concluded that: ‘They are like the last remaining islets in a landscape that was once imposing and coherent, but which is now eroded, flattened and thrown into disorder by the sharp waves of modernity’ (Ki-Zerbo, 1990: 7). Vansina (1985: 199), often quoted as the doyen of African oral tradition, concludes his work by stating that ‘oral traditions have a part to play in the reconstruction of the past and that its importance varies according to place and time. It is a part similar to that played by written sources because both are messages from the past to the present, and messages are key elements in historical reconstruction’.

The importance of oral tradition confirmed throughout the interviews was obvious during the fieldwork. Even though oral tradition might be flawed just like written sources usually are, a combination of the two can yield significant evidence. Ryder (1970: 33) was aware of this problem. He remarked that, ‘Too often it is assumed that anything written must be more reliable than verbal testimony; but every historian knows that a written document needs to be subjected to exactly the same sort of scrutiny as to the circumstances in which it was produced as does a piece of oral evidence. The word of mouth is no more or less subject to distortion, deliberate or accidental, than the written word’. But the subjectivity of both sources does not mean that their respective value should be ignored.

Fieldwork for this thesis was preceded by research in the archives in Switzerland, England and Cameroon. This made it possible to identify the areas, persons and families to contact in the field. Two potential problems emerged: First to record as many variants of geographical and social mobility as possible and to fill in gaps in accounts already published. The availability of variants was cardinal to cross-checking and establishing credibility. In some parts of the thesis references have been made to this process in the footnotes. Secondly, archival work helped suggest the best sequence in which to interview informants.

Fieldwork:

Talking and interacting with people – Towards a historical ethnography⁴

The fieldwork experiences were fascinating and emotional. The choice of Kom as a research area was dictated by two reasons: the first one was that as an indigene, it was an added advantage to the researcher because it minimized the language barrier. Consequently, one could work directly with informants without interpretation or research assistant. Of course the focus on ethnographic research and its use of certain sociological methodologies did not provide a complete and accurate photo of societal transformation in Kom. Clearly, further historical research was indispensable.

But there was a negative part to this effort. On the other hand there was the suspicion of some of the informants. We were always moved by the fear of being rejected, whether the informant was the right one, or whether he or she was going to answer the questions. To overcome this, it was necessary first fully to integrate ourselves into the society. The research was a collaborative effort and the researcher was part of the community. The success depended so much on the community as well as the techniques. The researcher had only minimally spoken the language before. The interviewer made a point of helping out his informants in domestic chores during interviews. For instance, he helped to peel beans in the kitchens, thresh corn and do weeding on the coffee farms while sharing in the informants' stories of mobility.

In his piece 'Fishing in Troubles Waters (...)', Nyamnjoh (2005: 295-324) observed that one of the fieldwork methods which he used was talking and interacting with people. He wrote:

The ethnography used in this paper has been harvested as I went along, propelled by a fascination with the theme in question and a background of similar interests pursued among students and youth elsewhere in Cameroon and Botswana. Over twenty-five years of research have taught me this: if you are passionate about a theme and have a way with people, rich ethnographic insights flow your way through interactions with others anywhere, anytime. One is always doing fieldwork, even when not formally in the field. While confining social research to formal field situations might yield 'hard facts', it detracts from those realities that may not immediately fit our practised instruments and scholarly *manière de faire* (...).

Like Francis Nyamnjoh, this researcher realised that the more one talked with people about the work, the more it was enriched and the more the researcher was also directed to other people. So obsessed was the researcher with the work that he practically talked with almost everybody who seemed at all relevant to the study.

Njinikom became the base of the operations since most of the informants lived there. Its importance lay in the fact that the church, school, the motorable road and post office

⁴ Unless otherwise stated this information on this section was obtained from informants

first came through Njinikom. Most of the people who appropriated these technologies were from Njinikom and some were still alive and could remember their stories and friends with whom they once travelled. From discussions with them they directed me to their friends and relatives in other parts of Kom and beyond. Occasionally, the interviews were conducted out of Kom, in Bamenda or Buea when the researcher was directed to an informant.

Before the death of Prince Mbain, we had talked with him about chief Anyway Ndichia Timti after reading many files in the Buea archives concerning him. He directed me to Ngwaah, another village in Kom, where he once lived. While in Njinikom, we met Lambert Tosam and his elder brother, Isidore Tosam, both of Ngwaah and they knew Anyway. They directed us to his brother, Ivo Nkwain, who was now living at Wombong, 1.5 kilometres from Njinikom. Unfortunately, Anyway had died in 1965 in Victoria. He however gave me the biography of Anyway and his photo. He also opened a smoked wooden box containing Anyway's correspondence which he claimed he had never opened. This seemed to be an archive kept in the kitchen. As smoky as the box was, its contents were valuable. There were letters of Anyway with missionaries showing that he was paying the salaries of teachers and that he also contributed to the construction of many other schools in Kom area. Most importantly, Anyway was one of the role models of *kfaang*.⁵

The research interest was shared with Andreas Ngongbi, a friend and classmate in primary school, who directed me to his mother who had lived in Lagos in the 1940s but was back in Kom. Her mother granted me audience. During the interview, she spoke about the glamorous life in Lagos and how she travelled there. She said she met with other women in Lagos from Njinikom to whom she directed me. These women included Elizabeth Ngebo who lives at Mugoegoe, another quarter in Njinikom. Elizabeth did not only recount her experiences in Nigeria but also showed some of the things she brought home, like the umbrella which she used in Surelele Stadium when the Queen of England visited Nigeria in 1956 and part of the luggage which she had brought home from Nigeria. After the interview, she directed me to another friend, Grace Wuyum, whose husband worked with the military in Lagos.⁶

Mr. Paul Kiawi Tuh in Buea directed us to Peter Waindim alias Batacoss Abalah whom he remembered as the oldest long distance trader in Kom, living at Belo, another village in Kom. We met and interviewed him. He was a kind man, who narrated his long distance trade experiences with passion, affection and joy. He recounted how he used to travel by showing spears and other artefacts and currency used in the journey. Most of his contemporaries had died but the one he remembered who was still alive was Daniel Ntu, alias 'Bobe Yola', whom he directed me to meet. Like Peter Waindim, Daniel appeared relevant to the research because he was one of the long distance traders who had been to Bamenda Yola, Takum, Makurdi, Ibi, Port Harcourt, Kumba, Tiko and Onitsha.

Another informant, Bartholomew Nkwain, enabled us to understand better the geographical mobility of Kom people to the plantations in the 1950s in the Southwest region of Cameroon and the role of Vincent Freeboy Mukong as a recruiter of labour in

⁵ Some of his correspondence has been produced in Chapter Seven and the Appendix.

⁶ These people and their experiences although not exhaustively discussed in this study constitute the mould of women who represented those who were responsible in one way or the other for social transformation in Kom. They also became the 'new women'.

the 1950s. Bartholomew first went to the plantations with his other friends like William Ful and Linus Chah.

Jerome Ngeh Tim shared his experiences about the coast, including *salt wata* stories, one of the factors that attracted some Kom people to the coast. Their first encounters with the sea whose water is salty led to the phrase in pidgin language ‘*salt wata*’. Generally, the coast was claimed to be the origin of ‘newness’ because those who returned from the coast brought such things as metal buckets, dresses, and radios that were new to Kom at the time. All these enticed more Kom to the coast.

Target groups: Women, men and youths

Gender is an important dimension of this study. African women have not featured adequately in discourses on mobility. What was the role of women in mobility and social change in Kom? Were they both active and passive agents? It was important to talk with Kom women and hear their own voices and their itineraries. Although some women were guided by their husbands in those discourses, there were also some who were independently mobile and therefore deserved more attention. This was necessary to counter recent discourses on women’s migration which maintain that women always accompanied their husbands. Those who migrated alone were, according to Kom people, brave women.

The study of youths showed that they were always in the vanguard of those who appropriated new technologies. Increasingly, it appeared that they were the first to enter schools, become Christianised and migrate. They were actors and actresses and agents of change. Fuh (2009) showed how youths in the Old Town neighbourhood of Bamenda were entrepreneurs. In this study Kom youths were indeed found to be enterprising and were the first people to appropriate *kfaang*. During fieldwork, although now old, our informants were narrating their youthful experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to achieve three things. It has defined the kind of history which has been attempted in this thesis. It has also located the fieldwork region as well as examined the history and historiography of Bamenda Grasslands and Kom. The chapter ended with an exposition of the methods used during the fieldwork.

Generally, the photo has been a disjointed one. This is because some people who were central to events were not available, others had second hand information while others had forgotten and still some tended to exaggerate what happened, a situation common with oral history. Information from archives was not completely exhausted because the files were either unclassified or destroyed. In any case the testimonies were useful and constituted a huge contribution to the raw materials of the research. What has been produced in this thesis results from a combination of the several sources discussed above. With the discovery of several sources, some by accident like the photos, some by design, this thesis was written which two or three years ago could not have been produced.