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

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Kom in global communication ecology, c. 1928 - c. 1998

Introduction

According to De Bruijn (2010: 167-168) the term ‘communication ecology’ simply refers to the interaction between the components that make communication possible and the possibilities that enable social relations, such as roads, cars, telephones, and the people who are part of it. This chapter has the following objectives: First, to describe the earliest phase in the development of communication in Kom. The question is how different technologies were able to take root in Kom. Writers such as Ferguson, 2006; Thornton, 1992; Eltis, 1993; Wallerstein, 1986 and 2002; Cooper, 2001, have shown how Africa had been part of the global processes with people and goods moving in both directions. Following that argument the chapter questions how Kom was part of the global processes which included the mobility of people and goods. What, for example, was the link between mobility, economy and trade? The other objective is to describe the political developments that changed the economy under colonialism, with a focus on increased mobility and technologies which came with the independence of Cameroon. How for example did these changes influence the birth of social hierarchies? In an attempt to answer the above questions, the chapter has been divided into the following sections: the creation and expansion of Kom, political leadership in Kom and the dynamics of geographical mobility, and the colonial and post colonial period.

The creation and expansion of Kom

The first Fon of Kom was Jinabo 1, son of Nandong.¹ At Laikom or Kom country three compounds were constructed which gave rise to three other clans, namely: *ekwu*, upper

¹ The following King list of Kom Fondom was compiled during fieldwork from knowledgeable informants and the present Fon. Nkwi's *Traditional Government and Social Change*, p. 81, was also useful but did not include the complete list.

Jinabo I	1730-1788	Ngam	1912-1926
Kumambong	1788-1800	Ndi	1926-1954
Nkuo	1800-1815	Lo'oh	1954-1966
Nkwain	1815-1830	Nsom Ngwe	1966-1974
Tufoyn	1830-1855	Jinabo II	1974-1989
Kimeng	1855-1865	Yibain	1989-1994
Yuh I	1865-1912	Yuh II	1994-present

compound which gave birth to the *ekwu* clan; *itinala*, lower compound which gave birth to the *intinalah* clan, and *achaf*, marshland which gave birth to the *achaf* clan. These compounds formed the nucleus of Kom Fandom, which was later expanded. According to Kom traditions some royals migrated out of Laikom and founded new settlements at Abuh, Njinikom, Yang and Alim. The possible reasons for this early expansion by mid-eighteenth century were population growth, and the desire for farmland and hunting grounds. Witches, wizards and other people who were ostracized from the settlement at Laikom also founded new settlements. Njinikom, which means, 'on the other side of Kom land' was one such settlement and is still considered a refuge for dissident exiles from Laikom.²

These early settlers at Laikom had displaced the aboriginal *Ndonalii* who later took refuge at Achain. Their first challenge came from an attack by the Mejang people. They had planned to attack and occupy Laikom when Kom men were on hunting expedition at Akeh but failed because Kom women disguised and dressed like men repulsed them. That victory was later followed up by the men who attacked Mejang at Mbam and displaced them. Thereafter, Fon Kumabong (c. 1785 - c. 1805), successor of Jinabo I, occupied Mbam (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982: 174).

Shortly after that event, Ngesbi, an *Itinala* Royal, founded Alim. Under him Alim became an autonomous Fandom with its own *nkwifoyn*, the executive arm of the traditional government. This was a threat not only to the central administration at Laikom but also to the unity of the Fandom. This threat ended during the reign of Nkwain who suppressed the Alim Fandom, seized its *nkwifoyn* and handed it over to Mbesinaku, which had become a vassal state of Kom. This transaction was intended to reinforce Kom authority over the area with Mbesinaku. Nkwain (1815-1830) captured many other areas.³

The nineteenth century was the height of Kom power as she fought with and displaced most of her neighbours. In the Belo 'valley', the first group to be displaced was the Nkwen, who were evicted out of Dzie-Nkwen. In c. 1845, the Kedjom people were expelled from Belo and took refuge in the southern part of Kom Fandom.⁴ Further south, smaller Fondoms were subjugated and brought under Kom control. These areas became vassals to Kom Fandom and included Baiso, Mbengkas, Mbueni and Mejang.⁵ Besides, their rich soils, suitable especially for oil palms and palm oil, the area also abounded with game which constituted part of the menu of the Kom palace. The animals included elephants, leopards and lions (Nkwi and Warnier, 1982: 178). In return Kom gave protection to these satellite groups against Bafut which also had an interest in conquering these areas. By the end of the nineteenth century, Kom Fandom had forty-two villages and ten 'vassal states'.

The population of these villages increased in the second decade of the twentieth century. According to the Colonial Assessment Report of Kom during this period the

² Interview with Prince Francis Chifukuin Ngam, about 88 years, 23 August 2008 Fundong, Kom. He is the son of Fon Ngam who reigned from 1912-1926.

³ Interview with His Royal Highness, Fon Vincent Yuh II of Kom, 88 years, Laikom, 15 June 2008.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ One way of reinforcing Kom hegemony over the vassal states was by allowing them to retain some of their traditional powers while exerting only minimal control through the collection of tributes. Some animals caught by hunters like leopards and lions were supposed to be carried to the Fon's palace at Laikom. Such animals caught in the vassal states were also taken to the Fon. In that way very little opposition to Kom hegemony came from the vassal states.

population increased from 5,570 in 1921 to 13,454 in 1928, recording a marked increase of 7,884.⁶ That increase was caused by the Fulani raids unleashed by the jihadists from the north of Cameroon who terrorised many groups in the Ndop plain, causing them to flee for safety into Kom. In describing that phenomenon, Nkwi and Warnier (1982: 82) assert that, 'groups of terror stricken people sought refuge in the hills where horses could not follow them or with more powerful neighbours'. These 'refugees' formed clans identifying themselves with their ethnic kin in Ndop plain such as Mbzihbah from Baba and Nggü from Babungo. Kom hospitality made the integration of these groups into their society easy. Security, unity and peace also attracted many people from neighbouring groups into Kom who distinguished themselves in the following clans – *Ambena, Ndowum, Ndokang, Ndo-Egayn, No-Wambong, Mejang* and *Ndo Nambang*.⁷

The territorial and demographic expansion of Kom was finally achieved by Fon Yuh 1 who ruled Kom from c. 1865 to 1912. Writing about Yuh's achievements, Chilver & Kaberry (1967: 33) stated:

After his accession Yuh transformed a loose area of influence into a well articulated kingdom which could attract adherents away from the Bafut sphere of influence (...) Yuh was consolidating a collection of villages in Kom proper, each with quite effective local political institutions and sub-chiefdoms of varied origin, such as Mejung, Mejang, Mbengkas, Achain and Ajung, when he was interrupted by the arrival of German administration.

Yuh not only give military protection to Mejang, Mejung, Baiso, Baicham and Mbengkas against Bafut harassment but also raided Bafut for 'slaves'. In that venture, Kom became the main provider of 'slaves' from the Grasslands to the middlemen trading with the coastal area (Chilver, 1962: 233-258 and 1967: 147-166).

After strengthening Kom hegemony in the south, Yuh turned to the northern part of Kom and attacked Din which is found in Bui Division today. Its ruler was captured and taken to the royal compound of Fuli and some of his people were handed over to the ruler of Mbesinaku. Din was temporarily placed under Akeh, one of the vassal states of Kom. Following the German colonisation of the Western Grasslands, Nso launched a protest against Kom's control of Din, and the Germans handed over the area to Nso probably because of the support which Nso gave the Germans during the Bamum war (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982: 176).

In its ambition to expand and acquire more human and natural resources, Kom attempted thrice to subdue Bum to no avail. She turned her attention to Mmen which successfully resisted the attack with the assistance of its Fungom ally. When the Germans arrived in 1889, Kom was preparing a major expedition on Fungom but that was foiled. By the end of the nineteenth century four northern states, Achain, Mbesinaku, Ake and Ajung, acknowledged Kom hegemony and became her vassals. Her superior military force explains the successes and expansion of Kom into foreign lands. The present boundaries of Kom owe much to the expansionist policies of Fon Yuh. The socio-political organisation of the Fondom has been well treated by de Vries (1998: 10-12), but only its most salient issues are relevant to our central theme. From the foregoing it is not an exaggeration to say that Kom in the nineteenth century was a polity created through co-option, inclusion and exclusion of other people.

The main economic activities of Kom were agriculture, local industry and trade. Agricultural production was mainly in the hands of the women who produced enough

⁶ File Ad/1928/24, Bamenda Division: Kom Assessment Report by G.V. Evans (NAB).

⁷ Ibid.

food for local needs. Men helped in the clearing of the farms. Crops cultivated included coco yams (*Colocasia Antiquorum*), yams (*Dioscorea Dumetorum*), native carrot (*Colus Dazo*), sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea Batatas*), cassava (*Manihot Utilissima*), native spinach (*Solanum Nodiflorum*), okro (*Hibiscus Esculentus*), egusi (*Lagenaria Vulgaris*) and groundnuts (*Arachis Hypogea*). Maize was the staple diet and has remained the only crop that is cultivated twice a year.

Industry included the manufacturing of local crafts, carving and iron smelting. Local craft industries produced baskets, raffia bags, and mats. Specialised skills or talents were required for one to become a carver, an important profession in pre-colonial Kom. Carvers produced chairs, stools, door posts, masks, wooden bowls, mortars, pestles, staffs, camwood, mixing bowls and a wide range of local needs. Kom was prominent in carving and noted for a carving school. One of the most famous of these schools was founded and directed by Fon Yuh. This school produced the *Afo-a-Kom*, a wooden statue the size and height of a normal human being, one of the finest pieces of art in the Bamenda Grasslands. Fon Yuh assisted by some of his pupils, carved a group of four life-size Photos. All these Photos were looted from Kom palace in 1904 (Nkwi, 1976: 19 and Gam Nkwi, 2005: 134-155).

Political leadership in Kom

The organisation of the Kom Fondom was very hierarchical. At the apex of the Fondom's socio-political and economic affairs was the Fon whose powers were sacrosanct. His palace was on a hill top of Laikom, the traditional capital of Kom. He ruled the Fondom with the help and respect of his people and was 'surrounded with carefully guarded secrecy' (Nkwi, 1976: 11). His compound housed his wives, children, pages, guards and advisors. Some colonial and post colonial researchers and missionaries maintain that the Fon had hundreds of wives who helped to enhance his prestige (Reyer, 1953). He was respected with many praise and honorific names, *mbai* (Lord), *Lum Nyam* (The greatest creature), *cha-mufor* (Great Man, and *nyamabo* (leopard). He was both a secular and spiritual leader and in the words of G.V. Evans (1927), 'he was the be-all and the end-all' (Argenti, 2007). A British colonial report of 1927 went further and captured the power and prestige of the Fon in the following words:

The present chief of Bikom, Ngam, by name is tall, dignified man of imposing appearance and truly fits the phrase 'every inch a king'. He is 6 feet 4 inches in height and about 60 to 65 years of age ... He is undoubtedly of strong and forceful personality but also can be artful, cunning and suspicious. It is by the force of his personality that he rules his people with a firm hand, and it is greatly to his credit that since the British assumed civil administration in the Cameroons there has been no real and untoward incidents occurring in his chiefdom except minor ones which were easy of settlement. Nothing is done in Bikom without his express command and he takes a real and active interest in the welfare of his subjects. At one time when the assessor of this report was in the field asking for eggs to buy at one hamlet, the head of the hamlet said that the eggs that were left were for the chief.⁸

The report shows that the Fon of Kom was the true and undisputed leader of his 'state'.

Diviners of the Fondom who were in constant contact with the spirit world were expected to initiate the new Fon into this new role. In this connection, Nkwi notes that,

⁸ Report by Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the General Assembly of the United Nations on the Administration of Cameroons under United Kingdom Trusteeship for the year 1951, 23-24, (PRO).

‘the Fon was believed to be able to transform into a diviner or a man of four eyes’ (Nkwi, 1976: 57). It was only after this initiation that the new Fon was believed to have acquired spiritual powers. It was also believed that this initiation prepared him to dispense justice fairly, without fear, and to protect his country from all evil forces that might threaten its existence. With these powers, there was no challenge to royal prerogatives in pre-colonial Kom. His authority over all the ‘vassal states’ was unquestionable. He was closely guided by the *nkwifoyn*, the executive arm of the traditional government. It checked the excesses of the Fon and the Fon also checked the excesses of *nkwifoyn*. The village heads and palace notables made up the *nkwifoyn*. This promoted checks and balances in government.

In the villages, forty-two in number, the Fon was assisted in the discharge of his duties by the village heads called *bonteh*. The *ibonteh* (village heads pl.; *bonteh* sing.) was the founder of the village. He was the representative of the Fon and reported anything that could threaten the peace. He also executed the orders of the Fon and *nkwifoyn* in his village, maintained law and order. Although most village heads did not owe their office to the Fon, all were required to present themselves and pay allegiance to him as soon as they were installed heads by *nkwifoyn*.

Government of the Fondoms was sustained by many segments of people, and de Vries (1998: 11) describes the various roles as follows:

An important role at the palace was fulfilled by a variety of pages, retainers and messengers. There were various positions within these ranks, but for the sake of simplicity the whole of the fon’s male servants and assistants will be referred to here as *chindas*. Most *chindas* entered the fon’s service between the ages of 7 and 14 years. Service to the fon generally lasted between six and eighteen years. At the palace, *chindas* were trained to carry out a variety of duties, ranging from annual labour to advising the fon (...) *Chindas* were trained in strict discipline, obedience docility and loyalty and sworn to secrecy. Service to the fon was compulsory and unpopular (...).

The work of the *chindas* was not always as unpopular as de Vries claims. Some *chindas* enjoyed working and being near the Fon. Many liked the job because when they reached the age of retirement, which was approximately 18 years of loyal service in the palace, they received benefits from the Fon which included two wives. Reporting in 1927, the District Officer, G.V. Evans, claimed rightly that ‘a *chinda* is the conscience of the chief and must share his most intimate secrets, and it is essential that he must be to the chief, a man of integrity and loyalty according to their lights’.⁹

The geographical expansion which led to the founding of Kom also led to the mobility and dispersion of many people before the Fondom consolidated its position in the Grasslands of Cameroon. According to Beck (2003: 643), the social hierarchy of Kom or any Fondom is characterised by the manner in which authority is delegated or shared between the apex or regional chief and the community leaders. Chiefly authority may be ceded from the local level chiefs upward to the village quarter heads or delegated from the regional downward to village level leaders. This addresses variations in the administrative power structures of many Fondoms in the Bamenda Grasslands and Kom is a typical example.

The power of the Fon in particular played a major role in introducing technologies to Kom. He negotiated his position in order to allow the missionaries to settle in it. This

⁹ File Ad2 59/26 Bikom Assessment Report (NAB). While in the field I met some retired *chindas* who spoke proudly of the job and I concluded that de Vries’s opinion that the job was not popular showed the contrary.

could be explained by the fact that the Fon was aware of the changing times. In this regard he was prepared to 'swim with the tide' by embracing change. If Kom had remained 'powerful' today in terms of technologies like the school, church and roads, this is due to the way the Fon negotiated his status. Governance and negotiation therefore were of prime importance to the settling of the church and school in Kom. The Fon of Nso did so earlier at a time when Fon Ngam (1912-1928) of Kom resisted Christianity until his death in 1926. Fon Ndi was more receptive to western education and Christianity and so 'stooped to conquer', meaning that he had to submerge his authority in order to make any meaningful gains from the new technologies. One continuing ambiguity for Kom was that on the one hand it was a remote region but on the other a technological 'hub'.

Governance and negotiation were later echoed in the attitude of another Fon in the Bamenda Grasslands. Writing his autobiography, Fo Angwafor (2009: 41), the paramount Fon of Mankon said *inter alia*:

To maintain ourselves as embodiments of the particular cultural communities we head, we have had to dance to the tunes of changing times, constantly having to negotiate our positions within the contradictions between state and our communities on the one hand, and in relation to competing expectations within the communities on the other. Was it not Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist whose books are well oiled with proverbs, who made a bird to say, since men have learnt to shoot without missing, I have learnt to fly without perching? Changing times for me and my colleagues have meant the ability to evaluate constantly and negotiate various innovations on the landscape of our politics and societies. We cannot afford to perch or rest on our laurels, lest we are swept away by the tides of change.

In other words, Fons were able to calculate what benefits they could win for their people with changing times rather than hold tight to the status quo.

Other Fondoms whose Fons did not negotiate their positions but rather resisted Christianity are still lagging behind technologically. They have not experienced the social changes similar to Kom and Nso. These Fondoms include Babal, Bafanji and Balikumbat. The role of the Fon was therefore very decisive because he had to negotiate his position before accepting these investments in technology like the church and roads.

The dynamics of geographical mobility

Land tenure

One of the factors motivating geographical mobility is land tenure. The Bamenda Grasslands seem to have an acute problem with fertile land due to an ever-increasing population. In Kom, the Fon is in theory the owner of all land. He leases out the land to lineage heads and quarter heads who are related to royal families. These royal families are *Ikui*, *Itinala* and *Achaf* which are believed to have been the founding families of Kom. There are also many families in Kom which were co-opted during the wars of conquest and others voluntarily moved into Kom. For such families, access to land is restricted, and the system of land tenure disadvantageous. Consequently, many who belonged to these 'have-not' groups and lack access to land prefer to move out of the region in search of greener pastures (Belinga, 2005: 61-62). This does not mean that members of the royal families were not mobile; rather the cause of their mobility was not linked to land scarcity.

Another factor is that the population of Kom has been growing while land is scarce. Available archival reports indicate that the population of Kom has been increasing as follows:

Table 3.1 Population figures of Kom between 1928 and 1968

Year	Population
1928	13,454
1938	22,339
1948	28,805
1958	38,560
1968	44,400 ¹⁰

Further, according to the 1976 census, Kom had a population of over 88,000. Ten years later (1987) the population had risen to 148,400.¹¹ As at 1998, Njinikom alone had a population of over 150,000 people.¹² The founding of Kom as we have observed indicates that in their geographical mobility they intermingled with and assimilated many other peoples. Even when they settled at Laikom they engaged in wars of expansion which led to the addition of several non-Kom populations.

Indigenous industry and the colonial situation

The northwestern Grasslands of Cameroon as a whole were an important iron smelting region. Iron smelting has been going on for about fifteen centuries in the region. Nkwi & Warnier (1982: 47) and Fowler (1995: 53-79) have shown that the iron industry was one of the biggest in Africa, judging by the number of workshops and the average yearly output computed from the volume of the debris that could still be seen. Pre-colonial Kom was an important iron smelting centre in the Bamenda Grasslands. In 1889, Zintgraff described Kom as a 'region of charcoal-burning and iron industry' (Chilver, 1966: 19 and Jeffreys, 1952). Iron smelting produced hoes, pick axes, cutlasses, knives and gongs. The most popular iron foundries were at Abu, Elimewong, Laikom, Belo and Njinikom. In 1927 when the D.O., G.V. Evans conducted an assessment of the Kom area, there were twenty-two established blacksmiths.¹³ The Fon owned one of the largest foundries and when the British began road construction, the Fon's blacksmiths made most of the hoes that were needed. The *nkwifoyn's*¹⁴ large gongs, three feet high, were produced from these foundries.

It seems that one of the objectives of the census by Evans was to discourage the local craft and industries. The colonial policy was designed to encourage production only for local markets. A British colonial report did not mince words.¹⁵ Among other things it said:

¹⁰ These population statistics were compiled from files in the Buea and Mission 21 archives. Except otherwise stated most of the files used here were consulted in the National Archives Buea. See File Ab/1928/24, Bamenda Division: Kom Assessment Report by G.V.Evans; File E-10-54AA-Ethnologisches inbor die Grassland-Stamme (Mission 21 Archives, Basel, Switzerland); File cb/1938/1, Bamenda Division Annual Reports for 1938; File cb/1949/1, Bamenda Annual Reports for 1949, 1950 and 1951; File cb/1958/1, Annual Report, Bamenda Division; File Ab/90, Cameroons Under United Kingdom Administration Report for 1959 and File Ci 1966/1, Economic and Political Reports, Menchum Division, 1966-1972.

¹¹ File NW/Qa/a.2001/1, Demography and Administration of the North West Province (Bamenda Provincial Archives). Provinces were change into regions in 2009 following a Presidential Decree.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Evans, Bikom assessment report, (NAB).

¹⁴ For more see File No. Ia 1926/1 Nkwifon society, 1926 (NAB).

¹⁵ CO 583/262/5, Local Production and Local Industries - Development of (PRO).

(...) It is probably true that the natives have not been encouraged to develop large handicraft industries for export because such exports would compete with similar industries in the United Kingdom. You always have to remember that there is a reason for owning a colony. I should not develop this theme for fear of being undiplomatic: I will say this much that the hard-boiled principle of running a colony is to develop it only in the sense that you develop its production and export of raw materials. Don't allow any outside capital to be put into developing colonial industries because in many cases they will compete too successfully with mother-country industries. Every finished article must be imported into the colony from the mother country, with the exception of certain things which it is not advantageous to ship to the colony – such as wicker furniture, ginger ale and such things, which would take up cargo space which can be better occupied by more expensive things. One illustration from my experience is chutney. In spite of the fact that all ingredients for chutney are, or can be produced in Nigeria, not one ounce of it is manufactured here. Instead, the materials are shipped to England for manufacture by British home industry, and the finished product exported – some of it back to Nigeria (...).¹⁶

This statement reflects the scepticism of a colonial officer. Instead of encouraging indigenous initiatives and industry, colonial policy feared it and sought to suppress it in devious ways.

Geography and mobility

De Bruijn & van Dijk (1995) and De Bruijn et al. (2005) linked environment and mobility in Central Mali. They also maintained that the natural environment also influenced human activities. Their works resonates in Kom. Kom occupied a high mountain terrain with an average height of 5000 feet above sea level and its capital, Laikom, perches on a spur of 6,324 feet higher. Kom has a surface area of 280 square miles. The landscape is extremely rugged and broken by rivers. The valleys that separate the spurs, divide the area into three large settled areas namely: Belo, Njinikom and Fundong. However, there are some low-lying areas found in the southern sector of Kom around Mbongkisu, Mughom, Mbengkas, Baiso, Mbueni and Ba-Nyam. These areas are fertile, with alluvial deposits brought down by rivers from the north. Fertile soils are also found in the valleys but generally the soils on hills are subject to leaching and are very poor owing to intense erosion facilitated by the heavy rainfall of between 1,300 mm and 1,400 mm annually. These soils have also affected the vegetation and ultimately the livelihood of Kom people (Takang, 1988 and Ghangha, 1988).

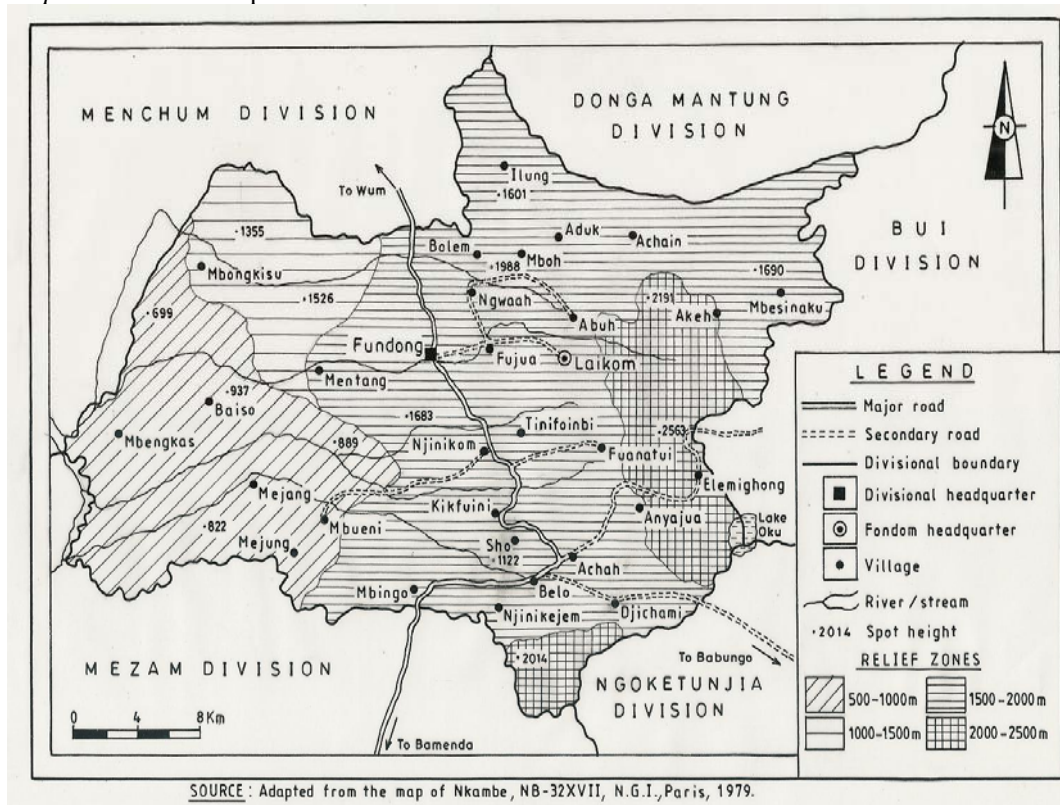
The first areas to be settled were generally the rugged hill slopes and elevated plateau, which provide enough security from attack. This explains why the southern region with fertile soil and game, remained sparsely settled because of a potential attack from Bafut (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967: 131). Overall, it is fundamental to note that most of Kom country was hilly and rugged. Consequently, such topography did not favour any meaningful farming activity and could not also sustain the growing population. Kom people therefore mostly migrated in search of 'greener pastures' out of Kom.

Trade and mobility

The connection between trade and mobility is well-known to students of Africa. This has been widely noticed by African scholars. For instance, Dike (1956) in his *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* has shown how through trade the Niger Delta was peopled by waves of migrants. Curtin (1972), wrote a critique of the slave trade which was

¹⁶ Ibid.

Map 3.1 Relief map of Kom



Source: Adapted from the map of Nkambe, NB-32XVII, NGI, Paris, 1979.

essentially and ultimately about trade and mobility. In similar vein, Meillassoux (1971) established the connection between markets and indigenous trade in West Africa. Zeleza (2003) has shown how pre-colonial trade was conducted in North, West, South and Central Africa and the nodal points as well as goods which were traded. All of these studies, directly or indirectly link trade and migration in Africa. Andersson (2006: 375-397) has shown how the trade led to the migration of people from the Mzimba district of Malawi and how the traders were responsible for bringing in South African goods into Malawi. Van der Laan (1992: 531-547) traced how trade led to the migration of Lebanese traders to the West African coast. Eades (1993) did similar work on enterprising Yoruba traders from Western Nigeria who established successful trading networks throughout the Gold Coast. In a similar way, Pfaff (2007: 61-88) has demonstrated how she followed two Zanzibari traders on their journeys. Traders were more active in spatial mobility than the other communities.

Trade in the Bamenda Grasslands and Kom was one of the main factors which influenced geographical mobility of people. Chilver (1961: 233-258), Warnier (1980a: 79-92), Kopytoff (1981: 371-382) and Rowlands (1979: 1-19) studied the region with regards to trade and migration. In Kom, although agriculture was the mainstay of the economy, trade also played an important role in the movements of Kom people. This trade was regional and long distance. Kom served as the bulk-breaking and transit points for the kola nut trade which was imported from Bali and Barfuchu and exported to Northern Nigeria. It was 'a funnel to a larger region that included the Ndop plain and

Nso' (Kopytoff, 1981: 374). As early as 1927 the D.O. for Bamenda, G.V. Evans, compiled statistics of both farmers and traders in eight Kom settlements. Table 3.2 presents the statistics. It shows the number of Kom traders and farmers in 1927. From the figures, people from Fuanantui, Abuh, Fundong, Yang, Njinikom and Belo were more involved in trading than those of any other village. That was indicative of the fact that these people were more active in spatial mobility than the other settlements.

Table 3.2 Farmers and traders in eight Kom settlements in 1927

	Total population	Farmers	Traders
Belo	729	141	9
Anyajua	791	98	12
Njinikom	1307	103	131
Fuanantui	1655	257	198
Yang	469	121	3
Mbaw	338	74	7
Abu	544	122	–
Fundong	583	122	–

Source File No. Ad/2, (1927) Bikom Assessment Report (NAB)

Kom people traded in kola nuts, iron products guns, kernels, salt, tobacco livestock and household goods. What is important in trade is that the traders recruited porters for long and short distance trade. On the average a trader could recruit as many as thirty to forty-five porters depending on the volume of the trade he was transacting. Trade engendered 'social stratification with a new social group emerging: merchants with large compounds and large numbers of wives' (de Vries, 1998: 10). According to the Bamenda Divisional Report, '(...) the Bikoms buy kernels from the Wum area, take them to Nkongsamba and returned with salt, cloth and tobacco for sale in their own country. Kolanut are cultivated in Bikom in small quantity but much is bought in Bali and Barforchu and then taken to Ibi, Kentu, Takum and Yola and the Adamawa area'. One report shows that the popular destinations of these traders were Wum and Nkongsamba and then onto Yola, Kentu, Takum and Ibi. The price of kolas varied from year to year.¹⁷

The greatest traders were Lucas Tosam, Missa Yong, Malawa Fuka, Danial Ayeah, Christopher Chiakeh, Paul Funjom, Stephen Mukalla, Marcus Ayong, Ndifon Awoh, Sixtus Jum, Babele Nkwain, Pius Timaneng, Jeremiah Nchamngui, Fallaman Nyongo, Nsanga Abola, Bama Ngesgui, Chiambah Bintum, Augustine Bainsi & Phillip Munteh. These traders came from Njinikom, Fuanantui, Fundong, Anjin, Belo and Anyajua. Apart from trading and mobility, it appears that much wealth was generated through trade and its usage was quite visible. In terms of conspicuous consumption, traders were among the first people to build new big houses of stones and zinc. They were the first to build large compounds, marry many wives, had many children and introduced new things into Kom. These traders were further knighted by the Fon of Kom after their heroic journeys and also because of the fanciful things which they introduced to the Fondom like aladdin lamps, clothes and whisky.¹⁸

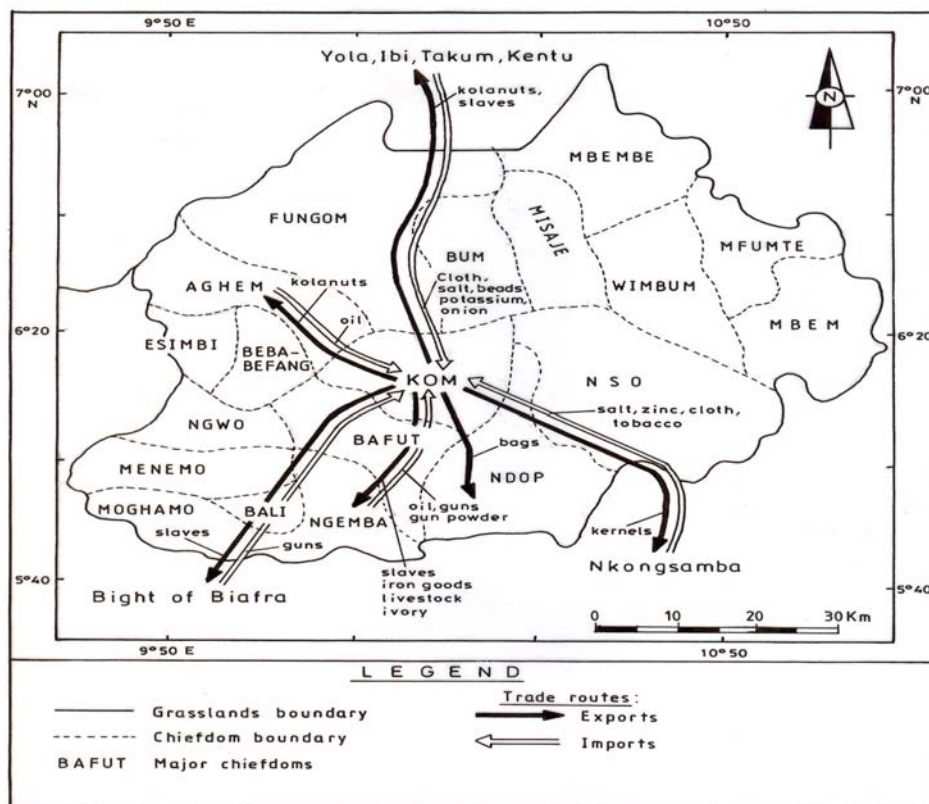
¹⁷ File No. Cb 1924/3 Bamenda Divisional Annual Report 1924-1927 (NAB).

¹⁸ Interview with his Royal Highness Fon Vincent Yuh of Kom, Laikom, 18 June 2008.

One sub-social group (hierarchy), which emerged as a result of trade, might be called 'apprentices' or 'boy boy'. These were young men who served a renowned trader for several years, accumulated enough capital and then began their own business. In certain quarters some of the apprentices became part of the 'family' of the trader. An example was Godfrey Chongwain. He was born in c. 1919 and at 21 (1940), he started serving Stephen Mukalla, a long distance trader. Godfrey accompanied Stephen to Nkongsamba, Victoria, Tiko, Kumba, Takum, Yola, Ibi and Onitsha. Besides, he ran errands for Stephen. He lived in Mukalla's compound until he got married to Thecla Fukuin Yuh in 1946. After their wedding they gave birth to their first son, Christopher Chongwain in 1950, in Mukalla's compound. Godfrey then started his own business and constructed his compound in 1965 of stones and zinc, although small in size as compared to the compound of Mukalla.¹⁹ These types of houses were a novelty in Kom architecture and were constructed by *kfaang* men.

The Report of Evans also showed that Kom traders trekked as far as Nkongsamba, a journey of 109 miles, which took nine days, and as far as to Yola, which took 62 days.²⁰ They travelled in caravans and one caravan could be as many as 65 people including

Map 3.2 The Bamenda Grasslands showing trade routes used by Kom traders



Source Adapted from Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy*, p. 175 and oral sources

¹⁹ Interview with Godfrey Chongwain, Wombong, 14 March 2009. He died on 8 June 2010.

²⁰ File No.Ba (1922)2 Report for the League of Nations 1922. Report on the Bamenda Division of Cameroons Province for the League of Nations by Mr. W.E.Hunt, District Officer (NAB).

carriers and guards. Peter Kehmneki was one of the short distance and long distance petty traders. He was born at Anyajua, Kom in c. 1908 and was not educated in the western sense of the word. Initially, he was a petty trader selling clay pots and groundnuts bought at Babungo, a neighbouring Fondom, and sold them at the old market near Belo. Regarding his experience in long distance trade he said:

My first long trip out of Kom was to sell potatoes and hides and skins at Adeima, Nigeria. After this I made my first trip down to the coast where I experimented with farming rice at Kombone in Kumba. After farming the rice and earning enough money I started going to Calabar, buying second hand dresses after the Second World War and selling back in Kumba, Tiko and Kom. After sometime I abandoned the second hand clothes and started buying new clothes at Onitsha and Aba in Nigeria. This again did not satisfy me as I went into the Kolanut trade which I was buying from Bali and selling at Yola (...) From that I went into the business of selling zinc, salt and nails and some items as you can see all around the store here (...) Before Belo could ever know about trading I was already advanced in the trade with a working capital amounting to 100 pounds. Now I sell only robes which I started doing with my late friend Bobe Songji. In Belo, my friends whom we used to go out were: Babele Nkwain; Pius Timaneng; Jeremiah Nchamngui; Bama Ngesgui; Chiambah Bintuum; Nsanga Abola and Fallaman Nyongou. Each one of us had a gang of porters of about 20 porters. During the treks everybody had a role according to his age. The person who was young fetched water, the elder cooked fufu corn and the children fetched firewood. A caravan of 15 needed three pots of fufu corn prepared for five people (...) Children were very important. They were in charge of kindling and rekindling the fire which kept the pots boiling. Once the water was ready, the elderly people like me would take over the pot. Children could not do it because the pots were special and only the elderly could cook with them because they lacked the skill the pot will 'somersault'. We also had guards who were to protect us from attacks (...).²¹

From his account we gather how long distance trade was organized and that there were about twenty carriers in his caravan. Long-distance trade supplied Kom with *kfaang* things like zinc, salt, clothes and rice. The participation of youths in the long distance trade and in the Bamenda Grasslands has been studied by various scholars. Warnier (2006: 93-98 and 1993) showed the role of the youths in the trade between the Grasslands and the Coast. He claims that during the colonial period the Grasslands chiefdoms 'evolved a working ethos which was strongly embodied by the young men and women of these chiefdoms'. Curtin (1971: 266-281) has also illustrated the place of youths in pre-colonial trading networks. Kahjum (2009), using the concept of bush trade, showed how the youths were in the vanguard of the Cameroon-Nigerian border trade which provided various types of goods for Cameroon societies.

Porters carried goods as varied as kola nuts, poultry and livestock only to name a few. One of the carriers was Henry Foinkijem who was born at Njinikom in 1932. He attended St. Anthony's School Njinikom for two years. He trekked twice to Adeima (Adamawa) and Mebeilawa (Mambilla) in Northern Nigeria, and on both trips he went with a different trader. He recalls that at one time:

(...) one trader whose names I forgot came from Babanki and beg me from my uncle. He wanted me to accompany him to Nigeria with kolanuts. My uncle left for my father where he took permission. My father accepted and this trader gave me five hundred kolanuts for me to carry. I was to follow this trader to Nigeria. Apart from the kolanuts, there was a mat and corn powder with some dry fire wood which was to act as my food. The load was quite heavy and in a caravan of fifteen I was out walked by 2 kilometres by the other people. My colleagues had to wait for me. By the time I met them the first question was whether I will cope with the journey. I protested that the load should be reduced and it was done. The corn powder was reduced and I was asked whether I could manage the load. I said yes but added that until we enter Nigeria, nothing should ever be added. We trekked for one month to

²¹ Interview with Peter Kehmneki, Anyajua, Kom, 100 years, 26 and 29 August 2008.

and from Northern Nigeria. We sold the kolanuts and then I had a very serious attack of headache. After I recovered from the headache potassium and onion was bought and that was all what I carried back to Kom.

At Bum an incident occurred which I will never forget. We were about to cross a very big river which had no bridge. On crossing I slipped and fell into the river and soaked the potassium in water. Potassium does not like water. There my master did not conceal his anger; he gave some serious beatings on my buttocks with his cane. We had to look for a compound where we had to dry the potassium using fire. That took us one night. The next day we took off and the next stop was my uncle's compound at Wombong. The Babanki man thought that I would continue with him to Babanki. I did not tell him anything but gave a report to my uncle on how we travelled. We stayed and very early in the morning I sneaked out and only came back to the compound late in the evening. When I came back the man was still waiting for me. I made my mind clear to him that I would not continue to Babanki (somebody comes in to greet (...)) My uncle accepted and told the man to continue without me. The journey was the most difficult journey I ever made. It lasted for one month.

The next person who came and collected me from my uncle was Sixtus Jum. He is of late. He took permission from my uncle. We were to go to Adeima (Adamawa). Adeima was a place where people used to take sweet potatoes and hides and skins from Kom for sale there. We did not carry anything because we were going to buy clothes. It was a very good and enjoyable trip. We were never in haste and anybody who was in haste was given way to pass. We were gradual and it took us two weeks to go and two weeks to come back. When we arrived we bought nothing but clothes which he carried and then I also carried my own. There was a big difference between the trip to Membelewa and Adeima. On our way to Adeima there was no hurry and there were areas where we bought our food but on the way to Membelewa, we cooked our own food and there was a lot of force used in this area. They will cut the clothes far below the normal measurement and so made so much gain. One good thing which I benefited from that trip was a bathali, which was a type of towel with several bed bugs in it (he laughs). At least it was good as compared to the trip I made to Membelewa. He further gave to me a new dress and also gave me a loin which I was to use as a blanket.²²

Henry's story calls for three comments: First, it shows how carriers were recruited and deployed by long-distance traders. From his story it seems that carriers were relatively young and were hired from their parents. In Henry's case he was staying with his uncle when the trader from Babanki negotiated with his uncle to take him to Northern Nigeria. But his uncle had to ask his father's consent before hiring him out to the trader. It was only with the permission of Henry's father that he embarked on the trip to Northern Nigeria. Secondly, it shows the challenges and difficulties associated with the trade. Peter's case is a good example but Henry's experience varies only in the fact that he transported potassium and onions. His story sheds further light on the difficulties that were generally encountered *en route*. It also shows how trade and traders introduced new things into Kom. A third issue is the fact that merchants represented different hierarchies: a merchant and carrier class. Unlike the older generation of chinda-traders, they made their fortune from hard work, energy and ambition. It would also appear that the traders were not from particular or privileged lineages. But it is certain that merchants did not take their own children for short or long distance trade.

The goods were carried in two baskets hung at the two ends of a bamboo pole about two metres long and carried on the shoulders. The carrier supported himself and the load with a long walking stick. In one of the baskets there was a knife to be used as a defence weapon in case of an attack.

The Kom experience of trade was similar to that elsewhere in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. As Pfaff points out these traders not only transported goods but more importantly newness and new ideas into Kom. As makers of new wealth and bearers of

²² Interview with Henry Foinkijem, 76 years, Njinikom, 21 December 2008.



Photo 3.1 A Kom carrier with his luggage en route to Northern Nigeria in 1940

Source: Buea National Archives

new ideas they were bonded as a new class with a new identity and formed a new social stratum. Consciously or unconsciously they represented a new way of life and controlled many carriers, wives, children and big compounds.

The Kom encounter with colonialism ruptured Kom society more profoundly. The pre-colonial period with its commercial and political hierarchies in trade and other activities was shaken. For example, in the colonial situation the old hierarchies – which included the Fon, *nkwifoyn* and quarter heads – were reinforced, and the structures which were put in place like the wider roads accelerated geographical mobility patterns. It also witnessed the emergence of rooted new social classes based on commercial capitalism and labour mobility that was hitherto unknown. Iliffe (1983: 6-7) reminds us that African capitalism existed before the advent of European colonialism. Meanwhile, Crush et al. (2005: 1-40) and Ranger (1988: 255-268) have shown that in Central and Southern Africa, colonialism created new forms of migration through labour that was needed in the plantations and other enterprises and sectors created by the colonial situation. In particular, Crush and others have shown how in the 1990s the end of the Apartheid era led to the restructuring of the state creating different patterns of migration while Ranger has shown how young men migrated to Rhodesia or to Kenya because

colonialism created niches which eventually influenced the migration of people in ways that did not exist before.

That re-organisation of Kom under the colonial rule led to the creation of new hierarchies that exacerbated old social hierarchies and brought about tensions within the society. The Fon who at the pinnacle of power before the arrival of the Germans was checked only by *nkwifoyn* was now under colonial control, answerable to the colonial authorities. Traditional hierarchies had no serious preference for the youths which meant that they were not really recognized as important, a point much reiterated by Mamdani (1996: 37-62). The youths, boys and girls who were anxious for recognition, tended to see the church and other colonial spaces as the only alternative. They became bearers of new cultures who for lack of a better word were thus 'local heroes and heroines', or what Okot p'Bitek (1968: 205) pejoratively calls 'the dogs of the white-man which (...) understand English'.

That re-organisation made possible by roads led to the movement of labour from the Bamenda Grasslands which became a labour reservoir. The need for labour from the Bamenda Grasslands is partly explained by the fact that the area was one of the most heavily populated areas in the whole of the Southern Cameroons and also because the coastal peoples on whose land the plantations were established, could not provide enough labour. Kom people also moved to the coastal plantations. Konings (2001: 174) has studied the plantation economy in Cameroon and has provided some illuminating Photos from the Bamenda Grasslands from 1926 to 1990, although the Photos do not specify the number of Kom in the plantations. Ardener et al. (1960) show that there were 256 Kom people in Victoria plantations in 1928 and by 1937 they were 518 men. Statistics available in the Buea National Archives show that between 1947 and 1958 there were 3,722 Kom people in the plantations. During the German period (1884-1916) the Fon supplied the labour but during the British Mandate (1922-1945) labour in the plantations became 'voluntary'. During that period a new class of labour recruiters emerged.

Boniface Ngoh was one of such recruiters. He was born in Njinikom in 1928 and studied in St. Anthony's School, Njinikom. He continued his education in Baseng, Kumba Division and completed his elementary school in Kumba Government School in 1947 where he obtained his Standard Six Certificate. He was employed as a plantation labourer in 1967 and gradually rose to the rank of a recruiter in 1973. Between 1973 and 1998 when he retired; he recruited 7,800 Kom people to work in the plantations.²³ In so doing he arguably contributed to a new pattern of geographical mobility as many more Kom people moved to the plantations.

Generally, those who went to the plantations returned to Kom as people whose mental horizons had been widened. This was evident in the way they behaved, spoke and dressed. They were relatively young and became the carriers and models of *kfaang*²⁴. Some remained at the Coast and founded Kom communities like Bamukom in Tiko and Bai-Bikom, in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. However, they always kept in touch with Kom and remained attached to the cultural practices of Kom.

²³ Interview with Boniface Ngoh, 80 years, at Njinikom, 27 June 2008.

²⁴ More activities of 'coast men' are a subject of Chapter Eight.

The British period (*tu ingris*), c. 1920s - 1961

The British took over one-fifth of the Cameroons from the Germans.²⁵ The rest was taken over by the French. In 1922 the British created Native Authorities (NAs) in the most densely populated areas of the Cameroons Province and Kom was one of them. The Fons were empowered as the heads of NAs and were responsible for the collection of taxes. Since the mainstay of the economy was subsistence agriculture, many Kom people had to move out in search of money to pay taxes and some also did so to evade the tax system. It is quite plain that the NAs re-enforced traditional hierarchies and at the same time led to the spatial mobility of the people.

In 1927 Christianity was introduced into Kom although with some resistance by the Kom. It brought schooling and Kom had the first Standard Six Catholic School which was opened in 1928 in the Bamenda Grasslands. People from the entire Grasslands and as far as the coastal area of Cameroon trekked to Kom for schooling (Booth, 1971 and O'Neil, 1991). This school provided the opportunity for some to learn to read and write and hence the emergence of a literate group. Those who appropriated this new technology further became mobile both geographically and socially. With the constant movements of Kom people, new ideas emerged about Kom and the outside world.

In September 1939, the Second World War broke out in Europe. Many Kom people were recruited into the British army. Ignatius Chiwo, born in 1922, was one of the soldiers. He fought in The Gambia, Tripoli, Burma and India. According to him there were more than 250 Kom people in his regiment alone. He claims that there were many more but they only knew each other when they came home after demobilization. One such was Francis Chiafukuin Ngam, who confirmed the story.²⁶ The war therefore led to the geographical mobility of Kom people. The ex-soldiers who participated in the war represented a new social stratum in the society.

At the end of the war the mandated territories were replaced by Trust Territories, among them the British Cameroons. UN missions visited the territory from time to time and charted the progress towards self government. The British responded by introducing reforms. Consequently in 1949 the Cameroon Province was reorganized, and the Bamenda Division was divided into three regions: Bamenda, Wum and Nkambe. Kom

²⁵ Cameroon became a German colony on Monday, July 14, 1884 and in 1889 Eugene Zintgraff the German explorer arrived in Kom on his exploratory venture. When the Germans started the construction of the Bamenda Berzik in 1902, the Fon of Kom provided labour and food. Kom young men were also recruited into the German Schuttruppe as soldiers, messengers and porters. It was on this arrangement that the Germans relied for effective administration of the area. With free labour a narrow road was constructed for at least horse-drawn wagons from Bamenda to Kom. The accessibility of the sub-region by the narrow road made it possible for German administrators from Bamenda to visit the area. For instance, in 1905, Lt. Von Heigelin visited Laikom, Belo, Fuanantui, Anyajua and Anjin. In 1908, two German posts manned by soldiers were erected at Sho and Njinikom. In 1914 during the Great War, some Kom people followed the Germans to Fernanda Po (present day Equatorial Guinea) and returned to Kom only in the early 1920s. These mobile people returned with new ideas and new culture that were to suffocate and convulse the established order. A case in point was Michael Timneng and his followers. More on him and his followers appears in Chapter 6. It is probable and almost certain that those who worked with the Germans as labourers, porters and soldiers represented another class in the society.

²⁶ Ignatius Chiwo, 87 years, interview Njinikom, 30th September 2008. He died on 15 August 2009; Francis Chiafukuin Ngam, 89 years, interview Fundong, 30 August 2009.

belonged to the Wum Division²⁷. That re-organisation came with the creation of new structures which included the Native courts, Native Treasuries, court clerks, messengers and tax collectors. The introduction of tax collectors was new. During the German period the Fon was the only person who collected the tax and took it to Bamenda where the German headquarters were found. However, the introduction of the above structures gave birth to a new social class.

In the mid-1950s, the 'winds of change', decolonization and the idea of independence for African colonies was already blowing across Africa. The demand for independence became more insistent. Kom elites strongly participated in the demand for independence through their membership of political parties in Kom. One such party, the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) which won the 1959 elections, had a strong bastion in Kom. The presence of that party also contributed to the creation of new hierarchies in the form of political messengers and politicians. In 1961, Southern Cameroons gained its independence from Nigeria and joined the French Cameroon which already gained her independence from France in January 1960. The post colonial period also created new ways which labour mobility flew and further technologies gave birth to new social hierarchies.

The post colonial period, 1961-1998

After independence in 1961, the British Southern Cameroons united with the Republic of Cameroon, the former French Mandate, to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The British method of administering West Cameroon for tax collection purposes still existed. The West Cameroon House of chiefs also remained. Tax collection was facilitated by village tax collectors who were appointed by NAs on the recommendation of the Fon. In Kom they included Jacob Kimeng, Dickson Diagha, Omer Tim, Simon Ngong, John Njuakom, Simon Kang, Kukwa Bi, Nges Fultang, Ngong Bi, Johannes Chibu and Sylvester Chitu. They constituted a new and influential social stratum in Kom society. They were mostly princes and quarter heads.²⁸

The federal system was abolished and replaced by a unitary state in May 1972. The impact was that Cameroon was divided into seven provinces and forty-two divisions. Kom became a Sub-Division of Menchum Division, a new administrative unit was at Njinikom, but it was later transferred to Fundong. This administrative re-structuring meant that in Kom new administrative offices were opened. New ways of geographical mobility were created. These new ways included mobility not so much focused in the direction of the plantations. Socially, most people gained employment as clerks, messengers, drivers and court clerks.

Following the new administrative decentralisation of Cameroon in 1992, Boyo Division was created out of Menchum, by Decree No. 92/186 of 1/9/92. It was further divided into three sub-divisions: Belo with Belo as the capital; Njinikom with its capital in Njinikom and Fundong which doubled as the capital of Boyo Division and Fundong sub-Divisions. The creation of Boyo division led to the creation of new services as well as employment opportunities. More Government Secondary and Technical Schools,

²⁷ File Cb (1949)2, Report by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the General Assembly of the United Nations on the Administration of Cameroons under United Kingdom Trusteeship for the year 1949 (NAB).

²⁸ File no. 031/134, Appointment of 1966-67 Tax collectors, Kom Council (NAB).

Catholic primary schools, health services, and new roads were created. These technologies led to more geographical and social mobility of people.²⁹

In 1993, the reconstruction of Bamenda-Fundong road began. This time it was a bituminous road. The construction was completed in 1998 and this greatly facilitated movement in and out of Kom.

Conclusion

We have seen that Kom was a state born of conquest and expansion. Kom like most Fondoms in the Bamenda Grasslands was created by excluding and co-opting other people who were not Kom. The Fon was at the pinnacle of power and remained a spiritual and political custodian of his people. He was assisted politically by the *nkwifoyn* and village heads. In this chapter the position of the Fon in relation to governance and negotiation which allowed the technologies to settle in the Fondom has been examined. Various factors were responsible for the geographical mobility of Kom people and following the colonial report of 1927 Kom people trekked to various places mainly to the coast and Nigeria. Traders were important not only because they were responsible for the introduction of new things (*kfaang*) which included zinc, onions, and clothes but because they also gave birth to other social hierarchies. Together with the merchants were tax collectors and 'boy boy' who constitute new men responsible for further social change and introduction of *kfaang* into Kom. The political and socio-economic developments in Cameroon from the colonial to post-colonial period directly and indirectly affected Kom in terms of mobility and the creation of social hierarchies and technologies. The presence and the negotiation of the Fon played a significant role. The next chapter focuses on the construction of the road of newness (*ndzi kfaang*) which further accelerated the geographical mobility of Kom people.

²⁹ See Monographic Study, Njinikom Council: Organised and Funded by Njinikom Council and Canadian Cooperation Support Office, Governance and Civil Society Fund (Fonds GSC), Canadian Embassy Yaoundé 2006, pp. 11-12.