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Bridging Mobilities: ICTs appropriation by Cameroonians in South Africa and The Netherlands

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A new form of madness in the village: The arrival of information and communications technologies (ICTs)

Introduction

*'I be used to see people them di waka tok for road them them
I check say them di craze, me too I don craze now weh I get ma own phone.'*¹

The arrival of mobile technology was received with awe by most and also seen as a must-have. But for others it was a new form of madness that had arrived in the village; with the few people who owned mobile phones running up hills, climbing trees or standing in the middle of the road where reception was good to take calls, according to informants in Pinyin. Owning a mobile phone greatly enhanced one's status in the village and such people became the link between their migrant kin and relatives in the village (de Bruijn *et al.* 2009; de Bruijn & van Dijk 2012; Nyamnjoh 2010). But for Mama Mangwi, getting a mobile phone a few months after her son had gone to South Africa meant that she joined the association of mad people *'wey them di stand for middle road di tok, wey motor fit jam them and they no go know'*² ('who, when receiving a call, are oblivious to where they stand because of the search for an area with network coverage and could be run down by a car').

Against this backdrop, the history of ICTs in Africa does not tell a single story. It is laced with different stages of evolution from embryonic to explosion. The Maitland Report published in 1984 grimly highlighted the embryonic stage and stated the discrepancies in telecommunication services between the developed

¹ Interview with Mama Mangwi, Pinyin; 28/05/2010. 'I used to see people walking and talking all by themselves on phone on the road and I thought they were mad. Now that I own a mobile phone, I too have become mad.'

² See previous footnote.

and developing worlds. From this report, one can glean what the communication situation was prior to the arrival of the mobile telephone. Juxtaposing that period with the current one of an explosion in mobile telephony, we can better understand the quest for appropriation of mobile technology as well as for being connected and not left behind on the information super highway. The report states that: 'More than half the world's population live in countries with fewer than 10 million telephones between them and most of these are in the main cities: two thirds of the worlds' population have no access to telephone services' (Maitland 1984: 13). In addition, the 2007 statistics on Internet use in Africa point to the continent lagging behind (Internet World Stats 2007; Cheneau-Loquay 2010). In the discourse on ICTs, Africa is generally seen to epitomize the digital divide and is still behind the developed world in the acquisition and application of ICTs and subsequently the benefits derived from them (Yumba 2004; Castells *et al.* 2007; Ling & Donner 2009). In both South Africa and Cameroon, access to the Internet is still limited to the cities and the urban areas. For instance, Pinyin has no Internet access, while Mankon got its first cybercafé in 2010.³ The introduction of wireless fixed phones with access to the Internet has not produce the desired effects because Cameroon Telecommunication Service (Camtel) is yet to penetrate the most rural areas, and the cost of running the fixed wireless service is similar to that of the mobile phone. However, the former is limited in that it cannot be mobile as it is too cumbersome.⁴ The statistics for Africa with respect to fixed and mobile telephones given by Castells *et al.* (2007: 22-23) corroborate Maitland's report, with South Africa being on the highest rung in terms of landlines and mobile-phone connection and usage, while Cameroon comes close to the bottom.

The era of analogue telecommunication appears to have been part of the teething problems that beset telephony (landlines). The switch from analogue to digital paved the way for the modernization and extension of landline services that subsequently witnessed the arrival of the first mobile-telephone service in Cameroon, which was provided by Orange Cameroon. The adoption of the mobile phone, according to Castells *et al.* (2007: 13), began to grow steadily from 1999 onwards and saw a sharp rise after 2001. Predictions that growth would slow down once the higher-income earners had been served proved not to be true (Horst & Miller 2005). On the contrary, the growth rate of mobile telephony has tripled, and penetration of the rural areas is on course as empirical evidence from this study illustrates. Today, Africa occupies a privileged position in terms of the highest growth rate worldwide (ITU 2004). Statistics on Africa's access to the

³ Fieldwork observation.

⁴ These are regular fixed phones but with the capacity to be carried around if need be for those with Internet access.

information super highway show a phenomenal leapfrogging and the gap described in Maitland's report with the rest of the world has narrowed. Close to three decades on since the report was published, the story of telephony in Africa, and Cameroon in particular, has changed tremendously with the mobile telephone making inroads into the nooks and crannies of villages such as Pinyin and Mankon and statistics for Africa showing it to be the fastest-growing continent when it comes to mobile connectivity (ITU 2009).

The ICT revolution has transformed Africa 'from (being) a world of landlines to a world of mobiles (that) provides us (Africans) with a unique chance to gain insight how a personal technology affects social organization, both for the better and for the worse' (Ling & Donner 2009: 4). While the 2009 ITU report predicted a continuous mobile revolution in which robust growth was envisaged, some villages, like Pinyin, have moved straight to the era of mobile telephony. However, Internet accessibility and landlines are still lagging behind.

Apart from condensing geographical spaces, ICTs are changing lifestyles by creating an informal economy and new job opportunities, especially in the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD) sector where migrants now champion the downloading and burning of movies for commercial purposes, with the Internet being a key factor in the promotion of this business in Cape Town (Chapter 6). In this respect, this chapter attempts to establish why there is a significant boom and anxiety to be connected, how the evolution of ICTs is changing the landscape of telephony and to what extent the change in communication technologies affected social relations. It also considers how far the appropriation of ICTs is an expression of identity and belonging.

Overview of current debates on ICTs

In an attempt to make sense of these technologies, we turn first to Fisher (1992; 266-268) whose early work on landline telephony in the US was trendsetting and unravelled the importance of telephony. Fisher concluded, on the one hand, that much as the telephone had intensified the rate of communication between families, it had not limited face-to-face communication, and on the other, it had bolstered and cemented kinship and social relations through calls. Yet while this study resonates with Fisher's conclusions in furthering our understanding and appreciation of the evolution of ICTs since its embryonic stage, this still does not explain the upsurge in new communication technologies. Moving away from landlines, Miller & Slater (2000) contend that the appropriation of technologies is a result of unfulfilled desires and the adoption of one over the other is because of the limited opportunities users could have with previous technologies. This useful insight may help us to understand the appropriation of mobile communication amongst the Mankon and Pinyin as well as its advantages to these societies

and why de Bruijn *et al.* (2009) see this emergence as ‘the new talking drums of everyday Africa’. Turning to Licoppe (2004) provides useful insight with his notion of ‘connected presence’. Like Fisher, Licoppe takes us back to the era of fixed phones and distinguishes between landline calls (prior to the mobile phone) and mobile calls. He claims that the former are used for longer calls and can cover a wide range of topics, and often at set times. Conversely, the mobile-phone call excludes all meanderings and close-knit networks are at hand for quick calls. Explaining his approach, he opines that a mobile-phone call:

... consists of short, frequent calls, the content of which is sometimes secondary to the fact of calling. The continuous flow of this interaction helps to maintain the feeling of a permanent connection, an impression that the link can be activated any time, and that one can thus experience the other’s engagement in the relationship at any time. (Licoppe 2004: 141; see also Ling & Donner 2009: 22)

Succinctly put by Ling & Donner (2009: 22), ‘we are engaged in a series of shorter communications; an ongoing dialogue that lasts through the day’. While these insights explain both the use of fixed phones and mobile phones and are still very contemporary in describing the use of fixed phones, they also shed light on the need by the Pinyin and Mankon mobile communities to be connected through the use of sporadic *tuyaus*⁵ that allow a ‘connected presence’ with home. Conversely, it shows how calculative agency is being remade and agency on the move. But the question is whether all migrants readily avail themselves for continuous connected presence. Why are some more connected than others? However, these questions do not pay adequate attention to the missing link or the ‘disconnected presence’. With this, I allude to the ‘mobiles’ who have migrated and do not call home, yet the family is aware of their existence and receives information about them from returned migrants or secondary sources. In other words, this is the agency of the absent. However it is an agency in which ‘distance is created; displacement is controlled; in which something is kept present whilst also being lost’ (Callon & Law 2004: 10). Thus it becomes a community where actors are trying to anticipate encountering or losing themselves to other modes of ordering, and where agency is being reconfigured. These encounters include migrant associations and other migrant communities and, to belong, they have to accept the rules or seek to change or adapt them.

Horst & Miller (2006: 7) continue the discussion of agency through the concept of ‘linking up’, which resonates with the way we see the adoption and appropriation of new technologies in this study. In their study of low-income Jamaican families, they aimed to find out ‘what Jamaicans have become in the light of their use of the cell phone and what the cell phone has become in the light of its use by Jamaicans’, i.e. how the mobile phone shapes social relation-

⁵ Different illegal means employed by Pinyin and Mankon migrants in Cape Town to call home.

ships and society, and how society is in turn shaped by the mobile phone. As regards the Pinyin and Mankon mobile communities, 'linking up' is less about having to store numbers for the sake of it than numbers that the migrant will draw social and cultural capital from at opportune moments. Similar to Horst & Miller's link-up, Scifo (2005 cited in Ling & Donner 2009: 18) propounds the notion of 'domestication'. According to Ling & Donner (2009), this approach's 'analysis follows the process of placing the object or the service into the broader context of our daily lives' and we 'redefine and adjust our uses of technology according to our needs'. However, these uses are not as elastic as one would imagine. Therefore, our understanding of the use/appropriation of the mobile phone will be greater if we heed Slater's call (2005 cited in Horst & Miller 2006: 10) to situate any particular technology within the context of 'communicative ecology' given that 'one needs first to appreciate its role as part of communication ecologies', where the principle of complementarity is supreme. This study shares this point of view but is not limited to the mobile phone alone. Although the focus on the mobile phone supersedes the other communication ecologies, it does not in any way preclude the Internet, Facebook or other forms of communication adopted by migrants. The different forms of communication reinforce our understanding of the scale of preference and also confirms the explosion and appropriation of mobile communication (Cheneau-Loquay 2010: 102; Etzo & Collender 2010). Looking at community members' use of social media, what is posted and the responses and comments that are elicited by the target audience enlightens us about the users of social media. In this regard, we get to understand the variations and tendencies of migrants' itineraries and their navigation and use of the various communication technologies through the different sociocultural and economic activities they engage in. The cell phone certainly occupies a privileged position in terms of usage given the rapidity with which it has met their needs (Manuel *et al.* 2007: 252) in favour of the Internet in the rural areas due to illiteracy rates and a lack of access to computers and Internet connectivity. It is probably for this reason that Jenkins (2006) considers the cell phone as the 'Swiss Army Knife', where the mobile phone sets up a conundrum of convergence and is the central actor in the 'convergence culture' where various media intermingle across multiple platforms and are consumed, re-cut, re-published and re-appropriated by active users in unpredictable ways. However, this is by no means to claim that the mobile phone has not got its own fair share of problems. Linking up means an availability of funds to buy air time, which is still a problem in most rural areas. However in the processes of linking up, migrants are in control of their agency because of their ability to determine their 'accessibility', 'availability' and 'reachability' (Licoppe 2004: 137-138) on their own terms. Whether it is the mobile phone or a fixed phone, Internet, Facebook and/or other social media, they

lend themselves to the above three categories that are inextricably linked. This is because, as Latour (1999 cited in Urry 2004: 28) remarked, social relations are not fixed or located in a place but are constituted through various 'circulating entities'. Such circulating entities, it can be argued, result in multiple connections of immediate presence and/or intermittent absence. Yet, as is argued by Vertovec (2004: 219-220), global linkages have been facilitated less by the mobile phone than by the boom in cheap international calls that have been widely appropriated by migrants. He refers to this as 'the social glue connecting small-scale social formations across the globe'. Much as this maybe the case, we cannot credit the boom in cheap calls over the proliferation of mobile phones as these calls connect mobile phones and their users, hence I argue that the proliferation of cheap mobile phones have necessitated cheap calls. Cheap phones and cheap calls are not mutually exclusive but tend to reinforce each other. Equally, cheap calls do not necessarily translate to social glue as the unintended effects may be unreachability because of too many unwanted calls. For instance, it was only in 2011 that Joe connected to Facebook and Skype. At first he was elated by the fact that he could communicate for free, but soon became weary of both because they impinged a lot on his business hours and drastically reduced his connectivity. Even when available on Skype (on a mobile device), he does not answer all incoming calls.

In their multi-sited and longitudinal studies, Castells *et al.* (2007: 246) came up with some astute conclusions about wireless communication. Paramount to their findings is the fact that: 'Technology does not determine society: it is society, and can only be understood in social terms as a social practice'. This is a useful insight for this study given the way Pinyin and Mankon have adopted mobile-phone technology without first using fixed phones. In this regard, it is important to understand the context of how far these communities have come and to appreciate their appropriation of ICTs in rural areas before yielding to sweeping assumptions of bifurcation that are creating a 'Fourth World'. These inhabitants of the Fourth World cannot be described as 'structurally irrelevant' (Castells 1996, 1997; Donner 2008) as they determined the market trends of production with their paradoxical demands for increasingly cheap and/or sophisticated gadgets. They are not merely passive users but also active agents in defining the complexities of the telecommunications technoscape.

From another perspective, the proponents of transnational discourse see the importance of ICTs in linking families back in the home country and in other diasporic communities in virtual spaces, as well as the new opportunities opened up for mobile communities in relation to their double presence in their host and home countries. The ripple effect is giving them the opportunity to lead a dual life and expediency in remittances (de Bruijn *et al.* 2009; Tsagarousianou 2004;

Grillo & Mazzucato 2008). And Castells *et al.* (2007) concludes that if ICTs enhance transnationalism, it can therefore be presupposed that communication technologies reinforce kinship and social relationships as well as organizing the complex activities of everyday life. If that is the case, to what extent could we assume that ICTs, according to Vertovec (2004), are the ‘social glue of migrant transnationalism’ and binding to all migrants? Is it not time for us to check how far migrants are prepared to sustain their transnational lives? As I pointed out in the previous chapter, if mobility entails physical distance and ICTs either breach or bridge that distance, we cannot talk of transnational links in absolute terms. Being a transnational is a matter of choice, though it is sanctioned by cultural norms that the migrant is expected to comply with. Nonetheless, this is subjective and migrants could also choose not to be transmigrants. As will be seen below, much as there are those who desperately seek ways of connecting with home, there are equally some significant others who have temporarily or permanently disconnected from home. We have been talking about transnationalism but should not forget to mention disconnections too as the two are inter-related. Before adopting a transnational mode of expression, it is important to discover how these communities were faring before the proliferation of mobile technology.

Phoning before the proliferation of mobile phones (1980s-1999)

Prior to the advent of advances in ICT, telephony in Africa was a service reserved only for those in the cities. This period was marked by faulty landlines, acute shortages of materials for new subscribers, long waiting periods before lines could be installed and a service facing corruption.⁶ As shown by Castells *et al.* (2007: 15), Latin America, like Cameroon, was also beset by these problems. Having a landline phone at the time was a mark of prestige⁷ and phones, even though they often had technical problems, served as a link between families and relations abroad. Despite the truncated network, most phone owners were happy to have a phone as it gave the family an opportunity to communicate with relatives abroad, like my family then. There was also the issue of distribution and a lack of materials for repairs. These setbacks paved the way for its access to be limited mostly to the urban centres and the wealthy as, at times, they were called upon to provide cables and poles (or Indian bamboos) for installation and maintenance. In relation to the Maitland Commission, one begins to appreciate

⁶ Homes of service operators became telephone booths early in the morning before work and after working hours, and those who paid more were given free access to international connections for a day or all weekend.

⁷ I still remember when my parents had their first fixed telephone installed in 1986. This was seen as an achievement and instantly became the link between families in the neighbourhood and their relations abroad.

the depth of the report when it is viewed from the problems that beset the distribution of landlines in Cameroon.

One thing that marked this era was the fact that there was a clear notion of location, time and space. Calls had to come at predetermined time or were made to notify relations about when to wait for a call. Consequently this form of telephony impacted on people's lives as they became immobilized having to wait for calls from abroad for long periods of time at designated locations.

In Mankon, there was only one landline (that was plagued by cable theft and technical hitches) that belonged to the Fon of Mankon in the 1980s until the arrival of mobile technologies. The coming of the wireless fixed telephone made provision for users to have fixed phones at home but this type of telephone came with the possibility to pass for a mobile phone and with connectivity to the Internet. However, wireless fixed phones may yet take root in some rural areas, such as Pinyin that is still without fixed phones.

Pinyin never witnessed landline telephone communication due to the proliferation of mobile phones that radically changed modes of communication. Many families are now for the first time able to talk to their migrant children and actually 'feel' their presence. To date (2013), Pinyin still has no provision for landlines despite its proximity to Santa where they have been introduced. The arrival of mobile communication has broken down the barriers that isolated Pinyin from the rest of the world. Despite the gains made in terms of penetration of ICTs in Africa, it is nothing compared to what has been happening in Europe. Africa is still chronically trying to catch up (ITU 2009). It is against this backdrop that the early Pinyin migrants, as opposed to their Mankon⁸ counterparts, sought alternative ways of communicating with family back home and at times going for long periods without news of their families before ICTs became widely available.

Maintaining transnational relationships and forming ethnic communities by migrants are not simply part of a quest to appropriate ICTs but, in the processes that ensue, they are a reminder for them of who they are, where they come from and also their reasons for preserving and fostering this identity and sense of belonging. It is also important not to lose sight of the fact that these communities do not form a collective identity in their place of settlement or with their homeland but share a common identity with members of the same ethnic communities in other countries (Tsagarousianou 2004).

⁸ Mankon migrants started coming to South Africa in the early 2000s when the mobile phone was already in use and did not experience the same problems when phoning home as their Pinyin counterparts did.

Conceptualizing ICTs in Pinyin and Mankon

The first mobile-telephone company in Cameroon was the French company Orange, a service provider whose services were limited to the cities of Douala and Yaoundé and that slowly moved to other small towns later. Although they seem to have covered a greater part of the territory, when I left Pinyin at the end of fieldwork in November 2011 and on a subsequent visit in May 2013, the Orange network still did not offer coverage in the research area. Similarly, the Cameroon Telecommunication service Camtel is also yet to provide services to villages, including Pinyin, although they are not considered far-flung or remote in the least. The arrival of the Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) in Cameroon in 1999 changed the country's telephony landscape as its goal was to reach the widest number of people as possible as was claimed by their slogan 'Everywhere you go', even though access to the network remains a serious challenge. Most of the villages that had never enjoyed fixed telephones bypassed this technology and directly adopted mobile telephones. The mobile phone has thus been hailed as a panacea for all communication problems in Africa in general (de Bruijn *et al.* 2009; Horst 2006; Horst & Miller 2005; Ling & Donner 2009; Ling 2004, Katz & Akhus 2002). As mentioned in the previous section, Pinyin has access only to MTN network coverage.

In Mankon, the story is different. The people there can access all three telephone service providers. When Orange extended its coverage to Bamenda, Mankon was also included, and with the inception of Camtel wireless fixed telephone, it was also instantly connected to this project. Although Mankon is still a village, what distinguishes it from Pinyin is the fact that it is only 10 km from Bamenda Town. With these various connections, it follows that there is Internet availability from all service providers available through a USB key modem. The arrival of mobile telephony thus changed the landscape of the village by linking it more closely to the urban town, but ownership of such a device was slow to catch on among peasant farmers. It was much later that people, especially those with children in South Africa, joined the information super highway, for example when they were sent mobile phones by their children or were given one prior to their departure to enable them to maintain communication. It was only in 2010 and 2011 that Akuma and Chi's mothers were sent phones from South Africa.⁹ When Akuma left for Johannesburg, his mother did not have a phone and communication with her was via his brother's phone for some years. When the mother had an urgent message for him, she would ask the brother to beep him. What is significant here is the distinction he made between the mother's beep and that of his brother. The mother would beep twice while the brother beeped once. Ac-

⁹ Phones have often been sent to Cameroon via this researcher. On one trip I carried eight mobile phones destined for family members.

ording to the mother, this was to help him distinguish who wanted him to call back and, perhaps, the urgency to the call too. If it was his mother, the call was returned immediately or he called to tell her he would call later. With his brothers, he preferred an SMS to beeping and, depending on the urgency of the message, he would call back immediately or respond with another SMS. For her part, Chi's mother would receive calls via a neighbour's phone until she received one of her own. A good number of parents I met in Pinyin and Mankon showed off the mobile phones sent by their children. For some, it was their third or fourth because the previous ones had been stolen or taken by a relation who felt that children abroad think only of their mothers and immediate family. They were thus being challenged to send another for the mother. Achiri, also from Mankon, has been in Cape Town for about two years but within this period he has sent his mother four mobile phones (with this researcher taking the fourth). And each time he sends a phone, a sibling or relation takes it from her, especially as he always buys an attractive phone that is too complicated for her to operate. The arrival of cheaper mobile phones with the provision for dual SIM cards has ushered in a new wave of owners as FCFA 10,000 (approx. € 15) will buy such a phone. This means increased connectivity as people can be connected to both networks (Orange and MTN).

Much as these technologies are hailed in both Pinyin and Mankon, people there have equally expressed frustration at the intermittent connection despite the installation of an MTN antenna in Pinyin. Although the antenna's arrival has improved local reception considerably, the issue of network coverage has not been completely resolved,¹⁰ probably due to the village's hilly terrain, with some quarters having full coverage and it being very limited in others. Quarters with patchy coverage have resorted to mapping out spots where reception is available. The enthusiastic manner with which they have embraced the mobile phone minimizes the challenges that they face and phones have metaphorically been compared to wives. As one informant said: *'dis woman dey so ee expensive for keepam, you pay for charge yi, you must give yi chop (air time), and na so ee di empty your pocket, but way for leaveam no dey, when you marry woman na for life noh!'*¹¹ This captures the fact that the arrival of the mobile phone is not a zero-sum game. While it has helped to bridge families, users have also had to adjust to its financial implications. People and phones are mutually constitutive and share an interconnected relationship whereby studying the phone in isolation is not possible as it has to be done with people *vis-à-vis* their interaction, which is embedded in their social and cultural practices. Despite the expense entailed in having a

¹⁰ Conversations with Gabriel, a Pinyin who was instrumental in getting an MTN antenna in Pinyin; 21/05/2010.

¹¹ Interview with Papa Ndoh, Pinyin; 28/05/2010.

mobile phone, the rural population in Pinyin and Mankon have come to embrace it and have adapted to the changes it has required in their budgets. In the same vein, they hail the benefits of the phone; comparing it to a marriage contract. They have made a lifetime commitment to the mobile phone. One Informant in Mankon said that thanks to the mobile phone, her children no longer have to cover long distances to carry messages to their maternal aunt as she simply calls and delivers her message herself. At this juncture, Castells' relational approach to technology can guide our understanding of the carefully cultivated relationship that Pinyin and Mankon migrants and their families have developed with the burgeoning of ICTs, especially the mobile phone, given the historic link between migration flows and technology. This approach postulates interaction between society, history and technology in migration that is fundamental to understanding the current trends of migration in the information age (Ros *et al.* 2007). Although all the informants are unable to recall when the mobile phone took root in the village, the early users all tell one story: the phones they had then were as big as bricks and so were nicknamed '70-seaters' (after the 70-seater bus) and owning one was a sign of prestige. Equally, they all recalled the long distances they would cover to meet peers or relatives and regretted that the mobile phone had greatly reduced face-to-face contact in favour of virtual contact. Meeting with kin is now more occasioned by family events such as deaths, marriages, births or family meetings.

When I made my maiden visit to Pinyin in April 2010, only certain parts of the village were electrified so users had to go to other neighbourhoods and homes with electricity to have their phones charged, at a cost of between FCFA 100 and FCFA 200 for a full charge. I did the same as there were no lights where I was staying then. Having a fully charged phone is one thing and having network connection is still another. Often, people had to check out areas in the compound or on the road where they could get reception to make calls. In most compounds, areas where one could get network coverage were marked out and people would go there to make calls.¹²

At my host's compound, for instance, all the phones are kept in a small bag that hangs on the wall in the kitchen and when one rings, the owner takes it at breakneck speed to the spot where there is reception before pressing the answer button (if it does not stop ringing on the way). However not all neighbourhoods experience such problems.

¹² This was the first place I was shown by my hostess and I was given directions about which way to face as well as the position of my phone.

Photo 4.1 Pa Joshua making a call from the road where there is network reception in Pinyin.



Photo 4.2 (Taken 2010) Everyone's phones (including the researcher's) are inside this bag. The kitchen was the only place that had network connection but there was no electricity then.



Photo 4.3 (Taken 2012) Taken at the same spot when electricity had been installed. The phones are still in the bag but on charge now.



The lack of network reception by extension makes it difficult for relatives in South Africa to stay in regular touch with family back home. Consequently, Jake in Cape Town asks the family to beep him whenever they are in an area with

network coverage so he can call back. Otherwise he spends most of the day ‘test calling’ to see if they are in an area that has reception.

By the time of my third visit in September 2011, my host had installed electricity in the compound and nearly the whole village had been electrified, which had led to an increase in mobile-phone usage. Charging had become easy and communication amongst families was more regular as phone batteries no longer ran down or went uncharged for days. MTN had also upgraded the level of reception and network coverage had increased, and had reduced local call tariffs and the cost of international calls. Users were being lured with adverts announcing these reductions.

Photos 4.4 & 4.5 Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) adverts showing the proliferation of mobile technology



Photo 4.6 Advert for Orange service provider



The excitement about the high level of network coverage meant the number of persons with mobile phones increased, at least judging from the families I visited where one phone used to serve the entire family but now almost every household

member owned their own mobile phone. This is in sharp contrast to when the mobile phone first arrived in Pinyin and when I made my first trip to the village. According to Mama Mangwi, when the phone first arrived in the village, people saw it as a new form of madness; ‘walking and talking to oneself on the street’ she maintains that ‘*I be use to see people them di waka tok for road only them say na craze, and I be deny say I no fit join that craze, but now wey I don get ma own phone, me too I don join that craze people them noh!*’.¹³ One can understand Mama Mangwi’s pessimism about the mobile when it first came to Pinyin. But with a son in South Africa and another in Douala (Cameroon’s economic capital), the need to communicate with them became apparent. Owning a phone changed her perception of them (cf. de Bruijn *et al.* 2013). In the early days, seeing people talk on the phone rather than with someone was a strange phenomenon. According to Papa Teneng,¹⁴ one of the first users of the mobile phone in Pinyin explained that they also contributed to this discourse of associating mobile-phone communication with madness; they were very loud on the phone and complimented it with too much gesturing. It was strange to the people who had no other explanation than attributing it to madness and to its newness, which Nkwi (2010) refers to as *Kfaang* among the Kom people. These early perceptions of the mobile phone, however, have been put aside and the device has been appropriated by almost the entire village. Those unable to afford a phone have opted for a SIM card that is then inserted into any phone at their disposal and a quick call is made. MTN SIM cards cost FCFA 300 (approx. € 0.50). In other cases, families have chosen to buy mobile phones that take a dual SIM card in order for two persons in the same household to share a single phone distinguished by the numbers of the SIM card – SIM 1 and SIM 2. A case in point is Joan. Before she could afford her own phone, she shared a dual SIM phone with her mother-in-law and the phone was always in her keeping. When the calls were for the mother-in-law, she would hand the phone to her and take calls that were meant for her. This system worked well for them until she got a job and could buy herself a phone. The affordability of the mobile phone has compelled most people in the village to join the ‘new form of madness’ by entering into a marriage contract with the phone companies as papa Ndoh’s remarks suggest (Footnote 11). The need to stay connected meant people devised ways of doing so with multiple users sharing one phone distinguished by SIM cards and/or having just a ‘beeping credit’ in their phones. What does increased connectivity mean to families at home and abroad? Much as it has eased phoning, especially for those in South Africa by making home close and at the press of a button, it has equally increased the rate of calls, beeps and demands from home, much to the displeas-

¹³ Interview with Mama Mangwi, Pinyin; 28/05/2010.

¹⁴ Interview with Papa Teneng, aged 71, Pinyin; 27/05/2010.

ure of some of my informants. Each time some of them receive a beep from home, the immediate reaction is ‘*Eish na weti again noh!*’¹⁵ The consequence at times is partial or temporal disconnection from home.

Although the mobile phone amongst all the other forms of ICTs has gained enormous popularity, the Internet and other forms of social networking such as Facebook are gaining currency as well although their usage is limited to family and friends in the cities.

While studies on ICTs tend to be euphoric about the revolution in ICTs, especially in Africa, the snail’s pace at which it was introduced and the still intermittent nature of mobile telephony in Pinyin, as well as the lack of fixed phone lines, are setbacks. Nevertheless, the coming of the mobile phone has given users the possibility to leapfrog.

The Internet and social media

The literature on the Internet has glowing praise for this new technology (Parham 2005; Edimo 2010) and the way it is rapidly penetrating the rural areas, linking the rural and the global. The Internet is seen as the essential communication medium through which contemporary societies communicate and it is increasingly linked to other media like broadcasting and print (Wilson III & Wong 2007). Despite this widely acknowledged claim and the availability of the Internet in developed countries, it is still to make the imprint in Africa that it has had in the rest of the world (Bratton 2013). The slow pace of the Internet compared to the mobile phone could be linked to low literacy rates and computer illiteracy, the high cost of electricity, the unavailability of the Internet and/or the high cost of computers and electrical equipment in general. Unlike Miller & Slater’s (2000: 27) findings in Trinidad, the Internet is yet to make its mark on rural villages in Cameroon, especially Pinyin and Mankon, and connectivity in some urban areas is still below par.

The case of South Africa is unique and peculiar. Despite its isolation due to its apartheid policies, it was able to boast a fairly good, functioning Internet service compared to other states in the 1990s, although it was largely used by what Lewis (2007: 111) calls ‘Internet geeks’. However, by 2004, the Internet had nearly reached its full potential in South Africa although current trends of Internet penetration in the country is on a rise (Lewis 2007: 107). This trend witnessed a steady climb with the introduction of the 40 km ultra-capacity optic-fibre Internet cables. International submarine cable connectivity will curb the country’s over-reliance on satellites and bring down the cost to users. Consequently, the Internet and social media are providing people with cyber spaces for social interaction

¹⁵ Reaction from Chris on receiving a beep from Cameroon in the course of our conversation.

and connectivity with the home country and with other diaspora communities and providing accessibility to a wider mobile community. Such network ties and connectivity have taken the form of 'virtual proximities' (Urry 2004: 33), with people switching from one form of technology to another. As Edimo (2010) showed in her study of Cameroonian migrants in France, the arrival of ICTs has not only brought them together in the host country but has equally given them the opportunity to become actively engaged in political debates back in Cameroon thanks to the Internet forum where ideas and debates can be shared. Migrants are also informed by issues at home thanks to the development of the cyber press and the online publications of private newspapers in Cameroon. A similar trend was noticed among the Pinyin and Mankon communities that are connected by their various Internet forums, such as the Pinyin News Forum (PNF) and the Mankon Forum (MF). This is what Parham (2005) refers to as Internet-mediated publics. With the addition of social-networking sites, the blurriness of boundaries is being further intensified, contradicting the notions of nearness and remoteness, or mobility and fixation. Bogard (2000: 40) points out that 'this blurring of boundaries between the monad and the dyad is an excellent image of the rapidly evolving symbiosis of bodies and computers, groups and communications networks, societies and cybernetic systems' that together enhance mobility, especially virtual mobility. This is the case with both communities' linkage with their Internet forums (Chapter 7) that promote discussion about the homeland, keep migrants abreast of happenings, discuss tribal politics and development projects, and share their views as well as uniting them virtually with the homeland. While this may be the case, for others the forum has become a place of virtual fighting. There are still a number of individuals who have no interest in being connected via the Internet, while others see it mainly as a conduit for sending photos of new-born babies back home as well as a way of receiving photos from home.

Although Facebook has taken the young generation by storm, some parents have joined it too, often encouraged by children abroad, or they have been registered by their children. They become actively engaged in communicating with their children through this medium and Yahoo messenger. Jessica in Mankon, for instance, is a retired municipal worker who has two children in the US, two in Russia and one in South Africa. As a result, she saw the need to ask one of the children to teach her the basics of the Internet in order to be able to connect with the rest of her children as Internet connections are less expensive than phone calls. She plans to buy a computer and access the Internet at home, with the possibility of then talking to them via Skype. With a computer at home, she could stay awake to talk to them in their own time zones, something that is difficult to do at a cybercafé. This is what Jessica said in this respect:

My children taught me how to use the Internet and now I am able to communicate with them via the internet. This medium is good because It permits one to write at length, and say all what you want without being scared of airtime like with the phone. If I pay for 1 hour, I know I can send a long email and maybe chat with him if he is online. I usually chat with him on Facebook and although he has not sent us his pictures, I have seen him on Facebook. I was also surprised to see my picture on Facebook and the comments made by all of them; how they miss us.¹⁶

For the literate and for educated parents like Jessica and my mother, their enthusiasm about developing virtual connections with their children has prompted them to take a crash course on the use of the Internet and its related social-media sites. Jessica plans to go for another short course in computing in order to access all the social-networking sites available on the Internet so she can maximize her chances of communicating with her children.

Despite the popularity of Facebook amongst the youth, some see it as a gossip site and maintain that the ‘thing with Facebook is that all relationships are mostly virtual and very few blossom to physical contact and most die a Facebook death’. To Fru, ‘Facebook has increased the rate of promiscuity, and provides them an avenue to chat (flirt) with many girls simultaneously’.¹⁷ But for Mark, it gave him the opportunity to have a long-term relationship with a partner he met on Facebook. This notwithstanding, migrants and family back home have increasingly taken on ICTs as a way of keeping track of each other and the various forms of technologies have been appropriated to meet their different demands and needs, as will be seen in the section that follows.

Appropriation of ICTs before and after the revolution of communication technologies

The first groups of migrants like Joe, CJ and Jake who went to SA in the mid-1990s and John who went to the Netherlands in 1999 will tell a different story of their experiences about connecting with home and the use of telephony. Their stories will be of the difficulties they encountered. This is remarkably different from the stories of those who arrived between 2001 and 2003 when mobile communication was gaining currency in South Africa and Cameroon simultaneously, when there were possibilities of connecting with home but calls were still expensive. And then there are the experiences of the third batch that migrated after 2004 and these are significantly different again, due to the proliferation of mobile phones in South Africa and Cameroon and considerably reduced rates for calls as can be seen from their stories. The stories are not homogeneous and represent the different periods of arrival of the migrants, and describe how they navigated the dynamic complexities of ICTs and mobility to maintain links with the home country. Telling a homogeneous story would be tantamount to telling a

¹⁶ Interview with Jessica and her husband, Mankon: 03/06/2010.

¹⁷ Conversation with Fru, Cape Town: 20/7/2011.

single story that is not inclusive: ‘the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the single story’ (Chimamanda 2009). This study eschews a single story.

For the first-comers, linking up with family and relations back home was challenging and a huge sacrifice in time, as will be seen in Joe’s story. Joe, who we met in Chapters 1 and 3, was the first Pinyin man to go to South Africa and he has been there for 17 years now. He is self-employed and works in property development for rentals. His accounts capture all the experiences of struggles with connecting home and the surge in connectivity, precisely because of his long stay in South Africa, having lived first in Johannesburg and now in Cape Town.

Joe’s story

Hey! It was tough, really difficult to get in touch with home. There was a Cameroonian who was doing import-export business and lived at Sea Point at the time (1998). Once I went to visit him, and as a Cameroonian I was very happy to learn that there is another in town. Towards evening I excused myself saying that I wanted to rush home to make a call to Cameroon, but he said there is no need for a rush that we could stay longer and I could use his fixed phone to call. Yoh! It was like a dream to see someone with a fixed phone at home that I had access to and, for the first time, the first dial went through. I talked for 2 minutes and it was as if I was at home. You see, such moments were so precious and a one-off. What usually happened was that there were some South Africans that worked for Telkom (Telecommunications Service of South Africa) and would work with locals at the location (townships). The locals would apply for a phone connection and more than one line would be installed at the house. Then they would tap into somebody’s line and make calls. When this is done, word goes round amongst foreigners that there is a *tuyau* at, say, Khayelitsha, and we will go there. I used to leave my house at about 4 am just to secure a good position in the queue. When the queue was too long and meanders outside, those who were outside were sent off and asked not to loiter around as this could raise suspicion. The rest of the people were crammed into the room. Each person was entitled to 3 tries. When you make the first try and it doesn’t go through, you give way for the next person to call. At the end of his call, you have your second try. If it’s unsuccessful, you make way for the next person and after that you make the last try. If the operators were lenient, you were granted another chance. You may spend your whole day there and leave without reaching home. But if you are lucky to get through, you leave there a happy man and this steam keeps you going for the next few months before you reach home again. You see, but when you leave without calling, your whole week and those after are bad as you are in doubt about how the family is. This was the case with me at times. This was not the only way at our disposal to reach home. After this, there was another one that permits one to buy a number from Telkom workers and this number would be dialled in at the pay phones before one dials the phone number. This would appear as if it is a local call, and you can call home or wherever for unlimited hours. This number was very expensive to buy and so those who got it would use it to sell to those who wanted to make a call (as a call box). As usual, there was always a queue to call. This *tuyau*¹⁸ lasted for a while and evolved to another *tuyau*. The next was that there were some people monitoring broken pay phones. Once one was identified, news quickly circulated and we

¹⁸ The various illegal ways of calling home.

would use it till Telkom discovered it and repaired it. It required one to put a R 1 coin in the machine and when the number is dialled, only 50 cents was used and it ends there; permitting one to call for an unlimited duration. When the phone was repaired, we devised another way.¹⁹

Joe's story covers the period from 1996-2003 when calling home was difficult. Prior to advances in ICTs, calling home was not a simple link up, but required sacrifice and endurance given the long hours spent trying to make calls and the long distances covered to where there was a *tuyau*. It also highlights how the migrants' need to reach home caused local Telkom workers to circumvent ways of making cheap calls available to migrants. The culture at the time was to rely on clandestine methods of phoning due to the expensive rates for calls. *Tuyaus* were relatively cheaper but come at a price of having to spend long hours in a queue or of having to go to the 'location' (townships) at very odd hours to secure a good position in the queue. Whatever the case, migrants saw it as their duty to reach out to the family and the instinct to go looking for availability of where to call (for those who cared, as not all were subjected to this) speaks to the tendency of migrants' wanting to connect and be back in his home community although miles away. In this regard, we can also draw on the nature of social relationship that existed between them and the family – a close-knit relationship with an emphasis on the quest for home in their migratory trajectory. For instance, Jake, like earlier migrants, had his ears to the ground in anticipation of news about the availability of a *tuyau*. He came to South Africa in 1998 after gaining his first degree and worked first as a salesperson, then as a security guard at a car park and as a hawker to finance his studies, and is also assisting his family back home. He now teaches at one of the universities and is married with children. He corroborates Joe's story:

Because these phones were illegally connected ... eh ... it's not expensive because you pay like R 2.50 a minute. For someone coming today, it will be expensive. But for us who experienced the difficulty of phoning in those days, because we had to go around town asking, does anyone know if there's a *tuyau* phone. And if there's a *tuyau* phone in Stellenbosch, you take yourself to Stellenbosch (about 30 km from Cape Town) to phone and you wouldn't feel safe while you're phoning there. So today having these phones for like R 2 or R 2.50 feels like you're phoning for free.

Q: And were there mobile phones back at home then?

A: No ... or yeah, that's the whole thing ... there were a few cell phones ... I cannot even remember when cell phones suddenly appeared on the scene. But in those days, it was mostly home phones, a few home phones here and there. You phoned and gave a message or you phoned and they would go and call someone. I was lucky because in our house in Yaoundé, there was a phone. So I could phone often. But most people would make an arrangement with you that there was a phone in this neighbour's house or in this relation's house, and could you go wait there at this time?²⁰

¹⁹ Interview with Joe, Cape Town: 24/07/2011.

²⁰ Interview with Jake, Cape Town: 11/08/2010.

The availability of ICTs has had a more far-reaching effect than could have been imagined. It is not simply connecting to family and friends instantly, but the psychological relief and the satisfaction migrants get from talking to family back home. Calling home when the telephone was not common could be compared to a vaccine that keeps migrants going for a while and when the dose is finished, the need to call becomes imperative again. The long excerpts by Joe and Jake summarize what the early migrants in South Africa (1996-2003) had to endure to communicate with family and friends. This contrasts sharply with Joe's experiences with the wide availability of communication technologies from 2004-2007. According to him:

The next were numbers sold by mobile-phone workers that would give unlimited access from a cell phone. Cell phones were very common then. This number is installed in a person's cell phone and the latter will use it as a call box for others to make calls at a reduced rate. Soon after, we discovered UK numbers. With this one, you convert the Cameroon number to a UK one via an Internet link. When you call home it is as if you are calling the UK and the cost is relatively cheap – R 1 per minute. This only came in much later when the cell phone was here but too costly. Today I can lie on my bed and phone home; even from here I just dial from my cell phone. It is quite cheap using MTN and even more so over the weekend. Calling the US on a fixed phone is 0.50 cents per minute. One does not have to go through everything we went through to make calls home.²¹

This second half of calling home is marked by the increased accessibility and availability of the cell phone in South Africa and Cameroon, the widespread availability of the public paid phone (phone booths) and the cost of phoning (R 5 per minute from public booths and R 15 per minute from a mobile phone), which was too expensive for migrants to make frequent and direct calls from their mobile phones. They therefore continued to rely on *tuyau*. But the difference here was that the Internet gave them the opportunity to access cheap calls through the Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), and the chance to communicate by email. Advances in technology have meant the closing in on the *tuyau* networks and migrants have turned to VOIP calls. But this is not without its own challenges as migrants often complain of the poor level of audibility. However, with further reductions in rates since 2008, *tuyaues* have been rendered redundant as migrants can 'lie on their beds and make calls' to anywhere in the world. This is reflected in the fact that migrants have multiple SIM cards from various service providers to take advantage of the best deals offered at any one time (Thompson 2009: 369). Ultimately, this paves the way for migrants to have a foothold in both home and host countries.

The ripple effect is that the mobile phone offers migrants 'increasingly powerful information processing capabilities that was previously limited only to PCs' (Donner 2006: 3). By the same token, migrants and their families back home are

²¹ Interview with Joe, Cape Town: 24/07/2011.

able to participate in events that are taking place either in South Africa or Pinyin and Mankon by watching DVDs of the events or seeing photos on Facebook. This gives an update of migrants' activities to the larger migrant community and friends back home. For instance, Chris in Cape Town posts his encounters with the traffic police on his Facebook page to tell friends about his day: '*chahi dis stupid traffic cop slam me a fine R800 JST BCOS I PACKED WRONG FOR JST I MINUTE. THIS GUY DEM THINK SAY MAN DI FIX MONEY WE GO METUP FOR COURT MASSA*'.²² Similarly, photos of the PIFAM party in 2011 were posted on Facebook and this evoked a series of comments from friends all over the globe.

Joe and Jake as well as some of the first migrants would make calls home but there were equally some early migrants who felt that the safe thing to do was to temporarily suspend communication with the family and focus on their daily survival. This was the case with CJ while in Johannesburg (before moving to Cape Town) and John in The Hague.

John is a bachelor in his mid-forties from Mankon who has lived in the Netherlands since 1999. He came to study and, like most Cameroonians, did not go back at the end of his course in 2002. Unable to get a decent job that equates with his qualifications (he has a Masters in Business Administration and a Masters in Management), he has settled for low-income jobs. Accordingly, he had prepared the family psychologically for his long periods of silence. He called to inform them about his busy schedule at school and at work, and told them that calls would be infrequent. The same goes for CJ who hails from Pinyin and was at Hillbrow (Johannesburg) when he temporarily severed ties with the family. The long spells of silence were due to their inability to assist the family financially. Calling home was a reminder of the challenges they had left behind and were unable to do anything about. Staying away and not wanting to get information was a way out for them. This brings us back to the issue of migrants' agency that was discussed earlier. Although ICTs are credited with connecting people, we should not lose sight of the fact that these technologies can also disconnect. What does this say about migrants and technologies?

It is worth noting how both John and CJ share similar concerns and these form the basis of their simultaneous disconnection from home. By virtue of sharing a similar culture from the Bamenda Grassfields, where migration has come to symbolize affluence and wealth on the part of the migrant (Nyamnjuh 2005; Nyamnjuh & Page 2002; Shindondola 2007), not being able to live up to this expectation means that migrants are not true 'bush fallers'. Absolving oneself from family ties in such circumstances seems the right thing to do. And connections

²² Posted by Chris on his Facebook page on Wednesday 7/03/2012, accessed 08/03/2012.

are often re-established when the migrant is financially stable and can respond to the demands of the family, as CJ eventually did.

Underpinning migrants' disconnections from family is an element of fear at two levels that is explicitly and implicitly implied in the way they perceive the responsibilities and expectations imposed on them by relations. Although John can call home because of the fixed phone at his uncle's, he chooses not to do so for fear of receiving a message that will necessitate assistance that he is incapable of giving, thus increasing his worries. Jake, however, calls because of the fear of bad mouthing from relations who may accuse him of not calling them. The issue to be dealt with here is migrants' emotional and psychological distress and fear of the unknown, which challenge the rosy concept of migration or bush falling in Cameroon (Chapter 9). John's tone and the incoherent manner in which he speaks are suggestive of frustration, fear of not being in control and an inability to handle news of the death of someone back home.

The use of these technologies fits well in migrants' experiences of relating with home. Connecting plays a dual role as it helps to conserve their identity and in the process provides space for them to affirm their belonging, thus re-echoing the notion of home to them (Parham 2005: 373; Tsagarousianou 2004: 62).

While the boom in mobile phones has increased connectivity and been instrumental in sustaining relationships, it has also given users a means of personalizing their callers by attributing ringtones to specific contacts. Although such usage is particularly entertained by those with multi-stranded relationships (Horst & Miller 2006: 63-64; Miller 2010: 112), it also insulates migrants from demanding calls and/or offers them the possibility of accepting or declining a call. The ringtones in themselves provide a social clue as to the phone's owner, with Christians tending to choose religious tunes/songs or Bible verses and teenagers going for the latest songs of a certain pop star.

Le nouveau Beaujolais est arrivé: The gift! The marker! The mobile phone!

In 1998 the first mobile phone I bought was not for me but for someone in Cameroon who asked me to buy one and send it via his friend and he would give the money to a designated relative at home. It was so expensive back then that I could not afford one and they were such huge things that you needed a bag to carry it along. I was not sure whether there was network coverage in Bamenda at that time and I was sure it was just for him to show off.²³

Similarly, when I was in Cameroon for fieldwork in September 2011, I met the brother of one of my informants in Cape Town and his first question was 'did you tell my brother you were coming home so he could send me the latest Blackberry? Look at the old phone (showing me the two mobile phones he was hold-

²³ Interview with Joe, Cape Town: 23/07/2010.

ing) I am using, and this one, I borrowed from a friend.’²⁴ Joe’s quote above and this example give an idea of how owning a mobile phone is fast becoming an identity marker.

Like mobility, the ubiquitous presence of the mobile phone has removed borders and linked relations in the village to migrant kin, and they are seen as a sign of globalization (Hahn & Kibora 2008). By the same token, the arrival of the mobile phone has remarkably changed the way people are perceived, depending on the kind of phone they own. The hype around the mobile phone could be attributed to that surrounding Beaujolais wine where the arrival of bottles from the new harvest receives wide publicity and people place orders in advance. The latest mobile phones, like Beaujolais wine, are received with excitement by both the haves and the have-nots (those who can only afford to window-shop), with the haves going for the latest model on the market and everyone else trying to extract the best from relations abroad or as gifts. Some buy Beaujolais simply to display it at home, while for others, it is meant for consumption only. In the same way, some people are fascinated by the latest mobile phones and apps with which they are not acquainted, while for others they convey status and the message that one has arrived, of belonging to that exclusive club of those who could afford the smartest phone and different apps, even if they do not know how they function (Smith 2006). It is in this light that Pinch & Bijker (1987 cited in Hahn & Kibora 2008: 91) note that the mobile phone is a ‘socially constructed technological system’. Yet others clearly see it as a form of madness.

Although most people back home are interested in mobile phones as gifts from relatives abroad, the craving for ‘bush things’ (everything that comes from abroad) has equally been heightened by the rate at which migrants send mobile phones home as gifts, thus giving the impression they are inexpensive and easy to come by. Every time I travelled from Cape Town to Cameroon for fieldwork, I carried about ten mobile phones that were to be distributed to families in Pinyin and Mankon.

In cases where migrants do not send phones, every available tactic is deployed to get one from them. But for most, sending phones, especially to aging parents, is a way of getting in touch with them directly. For parents, owing a phone is an achievement in itself regardless of its make, and phones have become a symbol of the proximity and availability of their children in a single beep. Yet for others, the mobile phone echoes competing agencies at least regarding ownership of the sleekest smart phones. While the move to smart phones has meant that communications have been taken to a ‘smart’ level, status for most is being redefined to reflect the phone one owns.

²⁴ Conversation with CJ’s brother, Buea: 08/09/2011.

Photo 4.7 Mobile phones and medication sent with this researcher to relatives in Pinyin and Mankon.



Navigating the conundrums of the mobile phone

The simultaneous availability of ICTs, especially the mobile phone, in both South Africa and Pinyin and Mankon could be, to borrow from Horst (2006), considered as the ‘blessings and burdens of communication’ to the migrant community and families back in Cameroon. While communication technologies help in strengthening kinship relations among some families, to others they extend the geographic and virtual distance due to the absence of calls or minimal calls, as migrants choose which to take depending on the caller (Horst, 2006). Calls may be seen as a burden, creating emotional stress due to demands for financial assistance or as the harbinger of bad news. It is in this respect that Siri Lamoureaux (2011: 40) notes that the cell phone has become ‘both a tool for ‘keeping in touch and for artfully avoiding that social obligation’ (see also Powell 2012: 15-17). For some, ICTs have given them the chance to perfect social gaming with relations and friends, such as Penn. He like some other migrants oscillate between SIM cards, with one that is used only to call Cameroon and a regular SIM for everyday use in Cape Town (that is not known by those back at home). The SIM for Cameroon is inserted only when he wants to connect with home and, once he has called, the SIM is removed. This means that relatives and friends back home cannot get hold of him and calling home is at his discretion. Others go to such extremes as changing their numbers regularly or declining to call back after repeated beeps. In the same vein, some decline calls from home. Frustrated at his son not responding to his repeated beeps, Papa Joshua remarked

that *'il ne peut pas contourner le vieux'*²⁵ (he cannot escape from me). As a result of migrants deciding their own 'accessibility', 'reachability' and 'availability' (Licoppe 2004: 137-138), the phone has become a curse for disgruntled families back home. Although Licoppe (2004) suggests that the failure of one interlocutor signifies unavailability, it is in this context that the 'mobile phone is used to reassure the other person and to reaffirm the link by means of very short call' (*Ibid.*: 145). Empirical findings, according to Licoppe (2004), suggest that all societies have land lines but this is not the case in Pinyin and Mankon. Equally, mobile phones to the Pinyin and Mankon migrants may also provide an escape route from family, even though they can be used to reassure the family of continuous bonding. This presupposes that each call that comes in is taken, which may not necessarily be the case. The question that comes to mind is what happens when calls on mobile phones are not taken or the recipient is not willing to engage in communication. The mobile phone could be seen as an actor and actant at multiple layers, not only facilitating communication between home and the host country, conversely perpetuating the distance between migrants and relations back home in the situation where migrants have severed links with relations, thus eliciting a response from the respondent (actor).

The misconception about a mobile phone is often that a person has their contacts and/or family members with them everywhere. It would appear so but, contrary to popular belief and as Powel (2012: 15) points out, 'cell phones do not guarantee availability all the time', as 'people hide behind their phones'. At one level, it shows the embodiment of people and technology yet at another, it shows the disaggregate that co-exists. To these persons, the phone gives freedom and choice simultaneously; freedom from unwanted demands and the choice of taking or turning down incoming calls because they could be easily manipulated (Powel 2012; cf. Hanh & Kibora 2008: 90).

While some migrants in South Africa have adopted the hide-and-peek style of connection, others feel that the new communication technologies have confirmed their fears and dismay that they are considered by family back home more as 'moving wallets' and have been stripped of any humanity, and hardly would they receive calls from home simply to check on them or to acknowledge receipt of remittances (Nyamnjoh 2005). Calls are geared towards demands and the norm is to beep, even when their money comes from the migrants. In Cameroon, there is an unwritten rule that migrants are expected to maintain links and call home. Mirielle's fiancé is in Cape Town and in the two years that she was in Cameroon before joining him, she never called him once. She is content to just send emails and texts because she believes he is the one who should call. Calls from home are

²⁵ Conversations with Papa Joshua, Pinyin; 12/11/2011.

often to announce a death, make financial demands or simply to beep. Jake, in Cape Town, expresses his frustration at such attitudes from his relations at home:

You know ... for me it's not just about phoning and getting these complaints and demands, for me it's about phoning and speaking to people who really show emotions of joy and excitement that you have phoned, even over the phone because you can sense them ... And also the fact that perhaps you are seen as a commodity more than anything else, a producing machine.²⁶

This excerpt from Jake aptly reflects the frustrations of most migrants in Cape Town towards their families but it also confirms the disconnection by John in Holland and CJ in Johannesburg towards their respective families. Communication between migrants and family becomes redundant when the migrant is not forthcoming with remittances. Much as they would like to maintain a 'continuous presence' within their family circle, the family's attitude towards them lends itself to materialism as opposed to filial sentiments and generates poignant feelings of exploitation and dehumanization. The resulting effect is phone fatigue on the part of the migrant, leaving some to resort to what Knorr & Bruegger refer to as 'response presence' (2002 cited in Urry 2004: 33). Although referring to traders' responses in the marketplace, it is suggestive of the attitude adopted by some Pinyin migrants to countering their frustrations regarding the lukewarm reception they get over the phone. Critical to understanding virtual ties is the fact that the tone as opposed to face-to-face contact is what matters. The tone cannot generate complete person-to-person contact but it has replaced eye-to-eye contact and it still gives away the mood of the receiver or caller. Although it is not as 'direct and pure' (Simmel 1997 in Prelipceanu 2008: 7) as eye-to-eye contact, migrants can sense how the recipient at the receiving end feels. In this regard, it could either create a sense of togetherness and belonging despite the distance or fragmentation and distance between caller and receiver.

Such an attitude is not exclusive to male migrants and most female informants share similar sentiments of dismay at the nonchalant reception they get over the phone from immediate siblings or children. However, such frustrations often go unnoticed by relations who are preoccupied more with their demands than any discomforts these demands may cause the migrant. This could be explained by the fact that in the Bamenda Grassfields, especially in Pinyin where polygamy is very common, wealth is still considered in terms of the number of children one has. They are considered primarily as long-term investments following the old adage that 'children are their parents' walking sticks'. Parents in Pinyin and Mankon make no secret of their expectations regarding their children. The experiences shared by Jake confirm Vertovec's assertion (2004: 223; Tazanu 2012) that telephone calls 'provide a kind of punctuated sociality that can heighten

²⁶ Interview with Jake, Cape Town; 11/08/2010.

emotional strain as well as alleviate it'. From another perspective, it could be partly these excessive demands on migrants and the ingratitude expressed by relations that push mobiles to withdraw from the family fold, as expressed by Jake, or the fear of calling that John and CJ have. However there are still some parents like Jessica who call their children simply to find out how they are doing.

While there is excitement and euphoria about ICT, it comes with intricacies that cannot be disaggregated and quietly concealed and that may unfold following careful analysis within the context of everyday life. This brings us full circle to the notion of 'connected presence'. How do we, using this approach, understand the intricacies that underpin such communication patterns? Can we talk of a wholly 'connected presence'? While it helps to gain insight into the urge for a continuous and connected presence, this is just one aspect of the story, one that is homogenous and where everyone is seen to be connected. It is devoid of such conundrums as described above. Often, being connected is done on the individuals' own terms and migrants, being social agents, try to improvise. The phenomenon of having an all-encapsulating theory that explains behavioural patterns in the use of ICTs and the dynamism and complexities of these technologies is yet to see the light of day, hence the contentment of using approaches that enlighten our understanding to specific aspects and behavioural patterns (Katz & Aakhus 2002). Unlike Licoppe (2004), Katz & Aakhus (2002) catalogue the merits of the mobile phone as well as its shortcomings. But at what price does this embodiment of technology come? Would it not be an exaggeration to see it only in terms of its intrinsic worth? Is there such a revolution if we compare the levels of penetration in the developed world to those in Africa?

Despite the challenges migrants face from home, there are still parents who take pride in calling their children and even of having back-up numbers of their friends in South Africa in the event that their children are not reachable. Jessica, for example, said that: 'When I am unable to get through to him, I call his friend, a neighbour here in the village, Patrice ... I keep Patrice's number as a back-up for when I can't get to him; I call the friend and leave a message.'²⁷

Conclusion

To sum up, the evolution of ICTs has not only made its mark in the annals of technology but has also kept social scientists busy trying to understand the multifaceted ways in which it has been adopted into our daily reality. Its uses and appropriation have been phenomenal, going way beyond the realm of the manufacturers and helping to generate a strong sense of shared space and time that overlook the realities of geographic borders. The ripple effect is that most villag-

²⁷ Interview with Jessica, Mankon; 03/12/2012.

es, especially Pinyin, leapfrogged from zero techno-connection and no fixed phones straight into the mobile-phone era. However, prior to the wide availability of communication technologies, early migrants had an arduous task when connecting with families in their home country. Through a myriad of manoeuvres to connect with home, they experienced first-hand ingenious, yet clandestine, ways of linking up with family. To these migrants, it was more than simply linking up given the long process it took to call home. When the call went through, besides checking on the family, they wanted to virtually transport themselves back home.

Others, conversely, are gripped by the fear of calling and being informed of 'unpleasant' news that will upset them. For others, the fear of calling and being unable to solve problems that require financial assistance because they 'live by the day' and cannot afford to send money home leads to disconnection. This type of disconnect from the family may be temporary or intermittent and the migrant only reconnects when his/her situation has improved and they are ready to send remittances. From this perspective, we are given a clue to the mindset of families back home and the emotional duress migrants undergo as a result of excessive demands being placed on them. In the absence of remittances, relationships may in some cases be at a low ebb and this can impinge on migrants' emotions.

Despite these mitigating circumstances, the transformational impact of ICTs on society and especially the Pinyin and Mankon communities is undeniable. Through their interaction with ICTs, societies are maintaining connections at a distance, with complex recurrent patterns of presence and absence. In the case of the Pinyin and Mankon mobile communities, ICTs are structuring and reconfiguring social ties, a process that has either created emotions of pain and antagonism or nostalgia, which reinforces their dual nature. They are capable of both connections and disconnections. However, the arrival of ICTs has largely been characterized by the benefit they offer in revolutionizing the world, dramatically changing how people live their lives (dualistically) and how they perceive ICTs as deterritorializing spaces and compressing time. But the question is whether this change is affecting the social fabric of society or eroding its cultural values? To perceive ICTs only as connecting people, as suggested by Licoppe (2004), or only seeing the litany of its merits, as Katz & Aakhus (2002) do, obfuscates the fact that these technologies can be manipulated and people hide behind them (Powell 2012). At one level, the relationship is convivial but at another it is antagonistic. This notwithstanding, communication technologies, especially the mobile phone, have been used extensively to network among relations, even though they are also used to sever links. But this is normally only temporary and a situation of normalcy is usually established when migrants become financially stable. The mobile phone has been 'culturally appropriated' (Hahn & Kibora 2008) to strengthen family ties and solidarity.

The analysis presented in this chapter has focused on the evolution of ICTs from their embryonic stage to their explosive stage and has examined the teething problems that compounded the various stages. It also looked at the various periods when migrants appropriated mobile-phone technology in South Africa to connect with their home country and the different periods that coincide with their arrival in South Africa. Conversely, the arrival of mobile technology in Pinyin and Mankon was marked by both tensions and memories of nostalgia. Through ICTs, migrants want to be virtually connected to home and to participate in the daily activities and happenings in their home country.