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

Nyamnjoh, H.M.

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Cover Page



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Author: Henrietta Mambo Nyamnjoh

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Summary

This study is part of a larger research project entitled 'Mobile Africa Revisited' that has been examining the appropriation of ICTs and how mobile migrant communities are shaping and being shaped by them.

Indigenous forms of communication were for a long time the medium of communication prior to the introduction of fixed phones, the telex and fax machines. The world, today, has been hijacked by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and, by the same token, the world has hijacked ICTs, thus creating an avalanche of information that has led to a network society. This network society has emerged as a result of phenomenal strides in ICTs and the wider expectations of societal and livelihood transformation that were forecast by earlier studies. Information and knowledge are the prerequisites that are driving mobility in the network society. In the process, ICTs have seemingly brought together families and other far-flung migrant communities, thereby creating virtual and social spaces and making transnational migration and mobility a way of life for many. This new lifestyle of transnationalism defies the age-old tradition found in receiving countries that prioritized assimilation as opposed to a dual pattern would make the host country and the home country a single arena.

I argue that while ICTs continue to enhance mobility for those who move and for those who stay put, they have become inextricably linked in forging networks and reconfiguring existing ones. Contrary to earlier studies that have predicted change and transformation in societies that have leapfrogged into ICTs, ICTs have been appropriated to enhance the workings of society. We should not see this as having created a fundamental change of keeping society apart but as improving their mobility and keeping them attached to their homes and their cultural practices.

This volume consists of ten chapters. The historical, theoretical and conceptual frameworks set the scene in the first chapter and show that migration and mobility are as old as the history of any given society. Chapter 2 introduces the field-work site and explains the process of data collection (methodology) and analysis. The study is an ensemble of conversations, my observations and interaction in the various field sites as well as extensive interviews and the employment of other ethnographic tools. It has adopted a multi-sited approach and concentrated on migrants from the Pinyin and Mankon areas of the Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon, following them to their new localities in Cape Town, South Africa and The Hague and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Working with mobile communities in three loci where activities are constantly on the move required more

than the Malinowskian intensive model, i.e. flexible methods beyond traditional ethnographic ones. It called for a multi-sited approach to capture these mobile communities on the move. This means that much as the research was focused on ICTs, communication technologies became an integral research tool for negotiating multi-sitedness, understanding the mobile community that by definition is difficult to grasp, tracking down informants and simply 'linking up' to improve relations between the researcher and the researched. By juxtaposing Internet-mediated technology, social media and telephony, I was able to begin to grasp migrants' mobility and appreciate the intricate web of connections that they had built and were continuously forging. As a result, I established a virtual and Janus-like presence at the field sites when I was physically absent through constant communication. The analytical framework is guided by the concepts of mobility, network, society and technology, habitus and belonging.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are the core chapters and offer a greater understanding of the theoretical concepts of mobility, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and network. Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 present the data analysis. The final chapter, Chapter 10, summarizes the study and draws some conclusions.

The goal of Chapter 3 was to set the stage by addressing some of the issues that frame the analysis of mobility and migration. To do so, I adopted a historical approach and then went on to look at mobility and migration and the way they are, with communication technologies, mutually reinforcing each other and creating a new mobile culture of virtual presence and co-presence. Mobility and migration are dynamic social processes that, in the wake of globalization, have seen a change in their character and nature, changes that are inextricably linked to advances in ICTs and in road and air transport. Although changes in migration and mobility have been phenomenal, they have also been informed by the migration patterns of the past, by bush trade and travel to the plantations in the southwestern coastal region of Cameroon. With an increasingly mobile society that wants to live a dual life with a foothold in its country of origin and in its host country, the arrival of new technologies has provided opportunities for such a dualistic lifestyle. Mobility is not limited only to the flows of persons and goods. Cultural mobility delineates the ability of migrants to move with their cultures and, conversely, take on or assimilate that of the host country as well as those of other migrant communities in the host country.

Chapter 4 questions how and to what extent the change in communication technologies has impinged on social relations. By focusing on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), with a historical note on how Cameroon has leapfrogged from its embryonic stage of poor accessibility concerning ICTs among the population at large to today's wide availability, we can comprehend the relationship between mobility and ICTs. In addition, the provision of basic

amenities, such as electricity, has helped the process of connectivity as cell phones no longer go for days without being charged, thereby increasing reachability and connectivity between home and the host country and among mobile communities. 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.

Chapter 5 examines the multi-stranded networks that migrants accumulate and how they navigate these forms of network. This chapter also deals with networks and the emergence of a network society with respect to PIFAM, MACUDA and all the other associations that have emerged as Cameroonian in a show of solidarity. The accumulation of network underpins mobile culture and networks become an important factor in social structure relationships as well as in the formation of snowball networks. Besides existing ethnic enclaves and social relational networks, there is a tendency to forge new ones and consolidate others. One such new network, which is of prime importance to the mobile communities in Cape Town, is one of weak ties that comprise the legal network of lawyers whose role it is to bail out migrants from police cells, arrange contractual co-habitation (life partnerships) documentation and other legal papers that permit migrants to stay in the country, and migration syndicates that perpetuate migration. Advances in new technologies are redefining the way migrants are linking up with each other and with family and friends, and also how networks are forged and maintained. Networking with weak ties is not permanent and the links are constantly redefined and shifting. The purpose of weak ties is to act as a bridge, with their ability to shift because these ties serve a particular purpose and if it is not met, alternative ties are sought. However it is important to note that weak ties connect better than strong ties. Such ties fuel migration and refugee processes as they depend on shortcuts that would have taken a strong tie much longer to accomplish.

The following four chapters (Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9) synchronize the 'being there' and 'being here', which simultaneously informs the writing process and engages my 'ethnographic skills into textual analysis in order to persuade you (the readers) of the authenticity of the accounts'.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the ways migrants form different levels of bonding within their intra-groupings. Chapter 6 dwells on migrants' economic activities and how, with the rapid development of information technology, migrants are now able to do business differently and have increased opportunities and improved and reduced mobility in some cases, with the mobile phone doing the mobility aspect for them. It elucidates on how migrants are constantly breaching laws and operating on the fringes when engaging in business activities. Compared to the economic activities of their parents in the past, ICTs have facilitated

communication and knowledge and created faster business transactions with lower overheads. This chapter posits migrants as a self-determined group that shrewdly and wittingly circumvent the legal authorities to further their business activities. In the same vein, it shows the complexities of agency and the determination needed to succeed. Migrants have become astute and adept at games of cat-and-mouse that they play with law enforcement agencies. But also, through these narrations, the theme of 'life as a struggle' crops up as well. As I set out to show for Pinyin and Mankon migrants, their involvement in the informal economy in Cape Town has to a large extent been informed by historical factors. The way Pinyin migrants do business in Cape Town seems to be informed by the skills they have inherited and internalized from the past and a long history of mercantile trading. Enhanced by the speed and efficiency of new communication technologies and no longer shackled by the weight of conservative trade, current migrants are able to better organize their affairs, and mobility has become targeted or they are mobile while sitting in the same spot. Conversely, this cannot be said of the migrants in the Netherlands who do not have similar opportunities to operate in the informal economy because of the strict rules regarding the setting up of businesses. Those with educational qualifications tend, therefore, to seek formal employment.

Chapter 7 offers in-depth accounts of both associations and their workings, with a particular focus on how they manage ROSCAs. These have come to be the backbone of the associations but, unlike in the past when these associations were engaged in home village activities, less out of fear of witchcraft than for the prestige it brings to those involved. To these new groups of migrant communities, participation in village development is considered as the 'noble' thing to do and it is rewarded with cultural capital and respect from peers and the village community. Associations play a major role in the societal fabric and seek to establish social cohesion amongst members as well as acting as a bridge between the host community and the home-village community. The social and cultural character of the association mimics that of the main associations back home and the activities that form part of their social life, namely sports, cultural activities, *njangis* and visits between groups. Such moments of cultural showcasing enable migrants to create a home-away-from-home, which reinvigorates their Pinyin and Mankon identity as well as their bond with the home village. In this regard, associations should be understood within the framework of agency in the production of structures because 'structure is both the medium and outcome of action'. Such structures define belonging, identity and exclusion and are a way in which actions can be enabled.

Chapter 8 explores the transcultural activities that migrant communities engage in and the various rituals they perform in the host country. These are essen-

tially life-crisis rituals, with the most prominent being death. How ICTs have helped to transform the way these rituals are performed is also discussed. As a result of mobility, some rituals have become fluid and dynamic but performing them help mobile communities develop as a fortress and reify their identity and belonging, disconnecting them from the host country. The chapter focuses on how mobile communities, although far from home, continue to uphold and participate in ritual practices and ceremonies in the host and home countries simultaneously. It shows how rituals are dynamic and reconfigured as a result of mobility and new communication technologies and looks at the ways in which these new technologies have allowed rituals to be transformed on the basis of the migrants' desire to be involved. Although many migrants make a conscious decision to leave home, it is a difficult one to sustain because home always travels with people through the various rituals and ceremonials that they maintain and reconfigure to suit their current locus, but also because these rituals are a form of social control and are, paradoxically, liberating. These are periods of intense communication between the community and other groups. ICTs have become a new form of autopsy for migrants to assess and ensure that the funeral and rituals have been done well. Autopsies today are in sharp contrast to those of the past and ICTs, namely photos and DVDs, have become the new tool of autopsy for migrants and families at home to ascertain if rituals have been done well.

The penultimate chapter (Chapter 9) in this volume details how individual Cameroonian migrants living in South Africa and the Netherlands are actively engaged in the livelihoods of those in the home country. It considers the myriad of transcultural practices migrants are engaged in towards their respective families back home, and also the way families at home respond and initiate similar transcultural processes. This is informed by the fact that looking after kin and ageing parents is inculcated in the moral upbringing of children. Emphasizing individuation illustrates the way individual migrants relate to and (dis)connect with family. It shows the in-betweens and challenges they deal with, the emotions that are generated and how they respond to them. In addition, this chapter shows how migrants' interactions are characterized by social relationships and may lead to 'memorable and meaningful aspects of their lives'. In this respect, migration is seen as an on-going emotional journey for both the migrants and those left behind in the home country, and an emotional challenge that they seek to mitigate. While studies of transnationalism have focused more on transnational links with the home country than on the transcultural, this chapter acknowledges the influence of the transcultural, taking both perspectives into consideration.

Trans-border and transcultural relations have grown as a result of migrants trying to maintain connections and relations with the home village and coming to terms with the emotions and trauma of separation and absence. This chapter has

gone beyond debates on transnationalism to incorporate the notion of emotions and belonging. Moving away from considerations of the community, the focus has been on individual migrants' connections with the family in an attempt to understand the emotional challenges involved and the related aspects of witchcraft that go with them. Emotions form an integral part of transnational/transcultural habitus. If these are guided by social relationships, then emotions are regulated by and respond to social relationships. Creating a home-away-from-home means that migrants have adopted the tendency to develop a 'Janus-like' view of transnational migration. Like the god Janus, migrants have a dual visage that enables them to transgress borders irrespective of their loci. From this premise, we can ascertain that while transculturalism has played a significant role in linking the home and host countries, we must guard against seeing ICTs as a panacea for a successful dual lifestyle. This would seem *prima facie*. The new communication technologies, much as they connect, equally serve to liberate migrants from the constant demands of the family as they have harnessed it to monitor calls and to know when and which calls to take. Or they are simply not reachable.

This study set out to understand the workings of the Pinyin and Mankon mobile communities in the context of accelerated mobility and ICTs. In an attempt to show how they function, I conceptualize mobilities in Chapter 3, ICTs in Chapter 4 and networks in Chapter 5, given that these concepts underscore the social fabric of every society, including mobile communities. In the concluding chapter, contrary to seeing a disintegration of societies, a breakdown in relationships and/or a dramatic transformation in societies due to advances in ICTs and mobilities, I argue that ICTs and mobilities have, in fact, complemented social relational interaction and provided mobiles with opportunities to partake in cultural practices that express their Pinyin-ness and Mankon-ness.

It should be remembered that disintegration and estrangement are part of the nuances of technologies that are akin to social relationships and are dynamic. ICTs serve as a connecting factor, especially as networking among families has increased due to improvements and transformations in communication technologies. Pinyin and Mankon migrants are still as rooted in the past as they are in the present. They are born into a community with a sense of home, moral ethos and cultural pride but live in a context of accelerated ICTs and mobility that is fast changing the way people live their lives. Acknowledging that technologies and mobilities have enhanced livelihoods in these communities, I maintain that they have not resulted in a change in people's affections for their cultural values and practices. Instead, ICTs have helped them to become more connected and increased their zeal to be transcultural migrants. In other words, mobile communities have appropriated technologies to bridge the distances that separate them

from other family members and to remain true to their cultural practices by participating in the various activities that give them a sense of family and belonging, as well as alleviating emotional trauma. In the process, this has brought home closer to them.

As regards policy recommendation, I propose that migrants should be seen as people who want to stay firmly connected to their cultural roots and the spaces they have created for themselves, where difference should be celebrated rather than ignored. As such, cultural mobility is a thing to be celebrated as ‘enhanced cultural mobility would foster new cosmopolitanism, an unregulated free trade in expression and feelings, and an epoch of global respect’. It is only when we begin to view identity as being mobile and as an often unstable relation of difference that we can begin to understand the full dimension of mobility.

From this study, it has emerged that policies put in place by states could either be seen as ‘policy failures’ or ‘securitization’. These measures probably epitomize the failure to consider migration as a dynamic social process and the very essence of global governance of migration indicates the complexity of the subject and the difficulty of finding a comprehensive policy that will mitigate migration because nation states are yet to comprehend the full scale of transnationalism where sovereign national states are crisscrossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of orientation, identities and networks. By the same token, states and policy makers have underestimated the agency of migrants to circumvent and circumnavigate border regimes and state legislature, showing the limitations of nation-states in addressing mobility. In this regard, policies need to take into account the development strategies that seek to manage migration flows in the sending country as well as those of the migrant in ways that serve national interests. They should aim to find a ‘win-win-win’ solution.

With regard to recommendations for future research, a coordinated and longitudinal study of migration syndicates would give insight into the continuous flow of migrants, the role of weak and strong ties in the process, as well as the appropriation of ICTs to enhance or mitigate the migration process.