

MIRJAM DE BRUIJN, INGE BRINKMAN, “Communicating Africa”, *Researching Mobile Communities, Communication Technologies and Social Transformation in Angola and Cameroon*

Si le concept de communauté demeure largement associé à sa dimension géographique, les études sur le transnationalisme dans les années 1990 ont conduit envisager la communauté comme un réseau plutôt que comme un lieu. C’est dans cette optique que s’inscrit cette contribution, en développant l’idée de « chaînes de personnes » liées entre elles pour former une communauté. Les recherches menées au Cameroun et en Angola/Namibie montrent l’ancienneté d’une telle notion de communauté, dont les membres ont toujours été considérés comme des chaînes d’individus dans des lieux divers. Au fur et à mesure des contacts qu’ils établissent les uns avec les autres, les individus construisent et entretiennent des relations communautaires. Les nouvelles technologies de l’information et de la communication permettent de se focaliser sur la mobilité et les interrelations entre les personnes à travers leurs histoires de vie et la manière dont ils utilisent ces des nouvelles technologies au quotidien.

Mots-clés : Communication – mobilité – commune - Angola/Namibie – Cameroun.

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Although communities are still often conceptually bound to geographical place, transnational studies in the 1990s have led to viewing a community more as a network than as a place. This contribution expands this argument by developing the idea of “strings of people”, with connections and communities being intrinsically linked. Based on material from Cameroon and Angola/Namibia, we argue that such notions of community have been in existence for a long time and that people have always viewed their communities as strings of people in various locations. As people contact each other, they construct and/or maintain community ties. Focusing on the life histories of mobility and connections, and on the ways in which people are making new technologies fit into their daily lives, this article discusses relations between new ICTs, community and mobility.

Keywords: communication – mobility – community - Angola/Namibia – Cameroon

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TITRE COURANT IMPAIR : MOBILITY, COMMUNICATION,
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AFRICA” - RESEARCHING
MOBILE COMMUNITIES,
COMMUNICATION
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TRANSFORMATION IN ANGOLA
AND CAMEROON¹

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Community as a concept is not easy to define. Some of the most prominent research to date has been the work of Benedict Anderson on imagined communities and the functioning of nationalism and citizenship. This has been influential in African Studies in debates on the construction of identities, with ethnicity and tribalism being seen as comparable to the formation of nation-states [Anderson, 1991; Ranger, 1993]. This article builds on the concept of imagined communities and links it to the debate in the social sciences on translocality and transnationalism that has focused on communities constructed over distance. In state policies and development programmes, communities are still conceptually bound to geography. The notion of “community” is regarded as intrinsically tied to place and interventions are traditionally geared towards change in a specific location. This idea has been criticized in translocal and transnational studies and, in the wake of globalization, many people have been seen to be constructing community life not on a geographical basis but on the basis of links and connections that exist in a spatial sense as well. As a consequence, mobility has become ever more important in the study of communities. By travelling and communicating, people form strings of connections that together form a community. Although these strings do not know a specific location or centre, they revolve around felt and lived bonds between people. Depending on the distance, the available communication technologies and the possibilities for travel, community life is actualized or imagined. It is argued that many translocal communities have existed for a long time in people’s imagination, as they felt bonds, and that new information and communication technologies (ICT) have increased the possibilities to live or experience these bonds in daily life. Hitherto the notion of imagined communities was used in connection with identity formation on such a scale that it was impossible to meet all community members. In the communities under review here, community life may be actual or imagined,

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depending on circumstances. Instead of focusing on (ethnic and/or national) identity, the notion of imagined communities is seen in relation to strings of people that may or may not be in regular contact.

Translocal and transnational studies started as a way of dealing with globalization as a phenomenon [Levin 2002]. However, it is argued here that such patterns of sociality have historical antecedents and any interpretation requires historical embedding. Throughout history, strings of people rather than geographical centres have been commonplace in many of the world's regions as a basis for community construction. So far, little research has been done on the ways in which people construct or shape these communities in practice. This article investigates the relationship between community, mobility and communication as a historical process informed not only by the technologies available but also by people's agency, expectations and ideals.

This contribution uses examples from south-eastern Angola/northern Namibia² and from northwest Cameroon³ in its arguments on community, mobility and communication. The important points of comparison are the history of mobility and the spatial expressions of community in these two regions, which show striking differences. In western Cameroon, mobility is culturally and economically inspired and young people are migrating in ever widening circles in search of education, life experience and cash. In Angola, on the other hand, discussion focuses on the historical context of mobility and travel, which was traumatically disrupted by forced displacement, violence and flight. This comparative perspective allows for an interpretation of historical continuity, gradual changes and sharp ruptures in the history of mobility and the imagination of communities. Personal accounts show how community, communication and mobility relate to the daily lives of the people in these regions.

The authors have been engaged in multi-sited research and followed family links over distance, crossing international borders in the process. Inge Brinkman carried out fieldwork in 1995, 1996 and 1999 in Rundu, Namibia and returned there in 2009. A decade earlier, war made it impossible to visit Angola but she travelled on to Menongue in southeastern Angola in 2008. The focus was on following the trails of social networks of people that the researcher had met while doing fieldwork a decade earlier. It soon became clear that family, kin and community were strongly intertwined. Most people indicated that "relatives" and "community" overlap to a large degree and that they felt a bond with kinship members. Yet the war in Angola disrupted family life to such an extent that some of the refugees and Internally Displaced People were forced to create community ties based on other criteria. When the war ended, some of these people sought to recreate ties with family members, while others continued to invest in the alternative social networks they had built up. Travelling into Angola implied a choice: the researcher followed family connections rather than alternative circuits. One of the reasons for this case study was to research the legacy of the war in Angola itself, so the choice to travel into south-eastern Angola was taken deliberately. This article presents the cases of two people, a sister and a brother, who dealt with war and peace in different ways, and highlights the impact that massive events and processes can have on people's lives but also the various ways in which people engage with them.

A similar strategy was followed in Cameroon, in the sense that multi-sited research methods were used to map the connections between people. Mirjam de Bruijn has undertaken fieldwork in the Grassfields for a few months every year since 2006⁴. People from different "communities" were followed in their historical and current itineraries. The spatial networks of people were clearly related to their ways of organizing society. In this case, communities are based on social hierarchies and people's mobility is clearly related to the mobility of the chiefdoms that define specific ways of

². Fieldwork and archival research were done in 1996, 1997, 1999 and 2009 with the assistance of Rebecca Kastherody and Theresia Antonio.

³. Fieldwork in Cameroon has been ongoing since 2006. The material presented here was gathered between 2007 and 2010 with the assistance of Tseghamo Angwafo and Pangmashi Yenlong.

⁴ In addition to interviews, short conversations and observations were important in constructing the case studies presented: Interviews with Mama Rahel, Baaba, May/June 2009, visits in January and August 2010; Interviews with Mama Monica, Baba I, May/June 2009; Conversations with the Fon Angwafo III of Mankon, between January 2006 and August 2010; Conversations with the Fon of Baaba I, between January 2009 and August 2010; Interviews and regular conversations with Habsatu between January 2006 and January 2010, and Excerpts from interviews with the inhabitants of Mankon and Bamenda, film (2009).

belonging and feelings of home. The other group in this area of Cameroon, the originally nomadic cattle-keeping Fulani, who are now living in an urban environment, are different in their ways of belonging and community construction. The travelling histories of both groups were followed through specific life histories. Travel can be interpreted as a form of communication that has been logically followed up by modern forms of communication, with the Fulani probably the most mobile in their history and their mindset. The two communities appear to have completely different styles of communities and strings, linking them to place and space in different ways. The researcher discovered these variations not only by following the strings between them but, in the end, by becoming part of these strings and travelling as a communicator between people based in Cameroon and other places, including her home in the Netherlands.

South-eastern Angola/Northern Namibia: the legacy of war and patterns of community construction

Historical patterns of mobility

South-eastern Angola has a long history of mobility. This brief overview does not allow for a detailed discussion and only the main patterns and dynamics will be outlined here. People in this region did not traditionally live their entire life in the same village, and although migration involving large numbers of people was not very frequent, it did occur. In pre-colonial times, slave raiding, local wars and droughts occasionally led to large-scale migration but movements of smaller family groups were more frequent. The most important reason for this was agriculture: farmers used a rotating slash-and-burn system that not only involved relocating the entire village from time to time, but also seasonal moves when people would stay at their fields for lengthy periods. Residence was thus not confined to one house, and people would move between huts and houses according to the season and their (agricultural) activities [Bailey, 1968, p. 42; Magyar, 1973, p. 433]. People usually moved within a set territory bounded by river beds or streams. In case of death, disease or witchcraft, a village might split up and move beyond these boundaries to resettle on new territory [AGCSSp, s.d., p. 2; White, 1960, p. 2].

In the colonial era, men were transported in groups to carry out forced labour in other regions of the country, while others migrated to work in the mines in (then) Northern Rhodesia and South Africa. Not all of them returned: some stayed on where they had been working, while others settled along the route or near (labour) recruitment points. Many officials regarded the young men's willingness to go to the mines as a continuation of earlier involvement in the caravan trade, which continued in this region until 1910. Travel would not only enable a young man to earn the money to pay the price for a bride, but would also give him prestige and knowledge [Schönfelder, 1947].

Visits played an important role in society, with relatives and friends sometimes staying at their host's homestead for a considerable length of time. After marrying, a woman would usually move in with her husband's family but as inheritance was matrilineal, family bonds between children and their mother's family were usually very strong. A typical example is the history of SaCindele, an elderly man who spent his youth in a village near Cuito Cuanavale where all the inhabitants were related to each other. He described how he used to visit relatives living on other rivers, and with whom they might stay for some weeks before continuing on to visit another set of relatives.

“One would always go with other relatives. With a grandfather maybe. He would then introduce you. You would take a blanket and a stool and go together. We would arrive and then he would say: ‘Look, this is our grandson.’ Or ‘This is my younger brother,’ or ‘This is my nephew’. Then the next time you could go visit there on your own because they would already know you. Then you might take a younger relative to introduce. One could also return together.”⁵

⁵. Interview with Alberto Chameia Vihemba (SaCindele), born in 1926 or 1940, Cuito Cuanavale, Rundu, 10 December 2009. Present: his son for translation. Language: Nyemba and some Portuguese.

Like other people from the region, SaCindele took mobility and travel rather than fixed residency as the norm. His description also made it clear that visits were not random: kinship played an important role. Although personal friendship was important and circumstances would influence the choice of residence, the moves and visits often took on a specific pattern related to kinship ties, known as *vavuxoko*, which are crucial to understanding mobility and migration in the region. The combination of matrilineal inheritance and virilocal marriage that is prevalent in many communities in south-eastern Angola informed the ways people connected with each other. Thus, married women maintained relations with several villages: they usually lived in their husband's home but paid frequent visits to their mother's brothers' and their father's homes where they had lived as children. Widows or divorcees usually went to live with their mother's brother(s) where their brothers and possibly their sons had also come to live. Men usually grew up at their father's house but moved to their mother's brothers' after circumcision. These patterns of residence and migration continued to remain important throughout the colonial era [White, 1960, p. 1-15]. The usual English question of "Where are you from?" is translated to include the word "river". And the answer about one's home and origins would be the name of one of the region's rivers. Home is not a fixed abode but is related to water that moves and connects many different places. Kinship ties and relations are now regarded as fundamental to understanding the cultural and historical heritage of south-eastern Angolan societies.

Mobility plays an important role in this conceptualization of community. A community is not so much determined by locality but by connections between various locations or strings of people that interact in varying degrees. Another feature of this pattern of community construction is the importance of kinship ties. The complicated system of *vavuxoko* relates to both patterns of mobility and community construction. These ties stretch beyond the immediate place of actual residence but people know that they can be actualized at some stage in their lives. In other words, the concept of community is imagined rather than actual, but with a possibility of future actualization. However, the complex interactions between community, kinship and mobility changed drastically when war broke out in this region in the 1960s.

War and the limits of choice: Peace and new possibilities

In the course of the 1960s, guerrillas in Angola's nationalist movements started fighting the Portuguese colonial regime. With its border with independent Zambia, the east of Angola became an important battleground. After independence in 1975, civil war broke out and the region was once again an area of conflict. With periods of interruption and varying degrees of intensity, war lasted until 2002.

Many of the inhabitants of south-eastern Angola fled to Zambia or Namibia during this period, while others went to live in Angola's capital, Luanda, becoming refugees or IDPs in the process, and often losing contact with their relatives. In the following, two members of one family are presented: Cihinga, who was born in Cuito Cuanavale in 1965, and his older sister with whose family he lived after being forced to leave Angola. They hailed from a village near Cuito Cuanavale, and as a young boy Cihinga would visit his mother's relatives near Mavinga. Even then, people had to travel in convoy as the war against colonialism was going on. Civil war broke out when Cihinga was nine, and he fled with his elder sister and her husband to Namibia. It was the first time he travelled without his parents. His sister's husband was working with a Portuguese mining prospecting company, and started to work in Namibia. From 1975 to 1992, they did not hear from any of their relatives until a truce was declared in Angola and elections were organized: "When peace came, we found out that my father and mother were already dead. And my other sister had passed away too. We only had one brother left. And my stepbrothers."⁶ The war wiped out entire families and the patterns of mobility connected with them. It was often impossible to visit one's *vavuxoko*, to receive news from them or even to know where one's relatives were living. Many people tried to locate their relatives but, more often than not, their attempts were in vain. When the fighting calmed down after 1998 and the peace treaty was signed, refugees' reactions differed. Some tried to return to south-eastern Angola as soon as they could, and these visits could

⁶. Interview with Antonio Cihinga João (SaOma), 8 December, 2009, Rundu,. Language: English.

turn into prolonged stays. Cihinga's sister went to look for her brother in 1996, before there was peace, and stayed on in Angola until 2006: "Because so many of my relatives had died; I only had this one brother in Luanda. So I said: 'Let me go.'"7 Cihinga himself had no wish to visit the country of his birth: "I am fully Namibian. It is different for my elder sister and her husband because they were already married and adults. I do not remember Angola. But for them, they have memories. They also visited Angola, me I never went. For me, if I went there, it would be entirely new."

Cihinga was aware of how the war had significantly influenced his ways of creating and maintaining social networks. He knew that normally, his life would have been centred around his relatives in various villages, especially in his father's and mother's brothers' homes. He would have grown up with them, visited them, supported them and they would have helped him accordingly. But as a result of the war, he had moved to Namibia and South Africa with his sister's family. He was forced to create ties with other people than his relatives, and to build up an alternative network of contacts. His bonds with his age-mates were particularly close and, for this reason, his social networks did not revolve around his relatives but around these unrelated people he had been at school with. He did not know his relatives personally, apart from his sister's family, and a few who had visited Namibia. However, he was in frequent contact with his network of age-mates (*vavusamba*) and they regularly visited and called each other: "And we created a relationship with them. We are now like family, like relatives. Wherever they are, we still communicate and there are times when we say: 'OK let us all get together and spend a day together'"

Cihinga's network consists of people of Angolan descent whose relatives died in the war, who were adopted, or who could not grow up in the region where they were born. They see each other as siblings and help each other out whenever possible. Thus when Cihinga travels to Namibia's capital, Windhoek, he does not stay at his stepbrother's place, but with a friend from his *vavusamba* group. He invests time in this network because of its importance in his life. By contrast, he sees no need to invest time and money in visiting his relatives in Angola. Several factors have had direct consequences for Cihinga's patterns of social interaction and the evaluation of his own identity. A first point is the forced mobility that he experienced during the war when he had to leave his region of birth to live in a foreign country. The loss of his relatives and/or the impossibility of maintaining contact with them increased his need to engage and invest in social networks with people other than kin. In this, Cihinga's sister differs sharply. She is also well-integrated in the Angolan community in Namibia and knows many people, especially the female traders there, but as soon as there was the possibility to travel to Angola, she went there to look for her brother and other relatives.

Actualizing imagined bonds (or not)

The most important method of staying in touch with community members used to be travel and oral messages. These were impossible during the war and people could only contact each other, if at all, through the Red Cross's messaging service. Or they might receive snippets of news if people from their area happened to be in their place of exile. Cihinga's sister was actively engaged in this. Asked how she found her brother, she answered: "By looking for them. Every time people from Angola came, I would ask: 'Do you know this person?' Until you meet someone who says: 'Yes, I know this person.'" She received three messages through the Red Cross: the first informed her that her older sister had died; the second that her mother had died; and the third that her father had died. There was no way in which she could go to the funerals and even mourning over her relatives was risky: "If the South Africans heard that you were crying, they could say: 'These people are crying for Angola'. Then they would come and say: 'So you know what is happening in Angola... How? You are part of the MPLA, aren't you?' It could create problems."

Cihinga, on the contrary, did not try to find his relatives, although his sister passed on the information she received to him. When the war ended, the situation changed. Possibilities for communication had previously been extremely limited and risky, but with the arrival of peace, people in Angola could once again contact people by visiting themselves or hear from each other

⁷Interview with Regina Ntumba (VaNyakaNgombe), born in 1959, Cuito Cuanavale, 6 December 2009, Rundu, Language: Portuguese.

via visitors from their area. Renewed opportunities for travel were regarded as one of the most significant consequences of the end of the war, as peace has always been linked to the possibility of moving about freely. Cihinga's sister grasped this opportunity even before the war had ended. Initially it was still difficult to reach Angola, despite decreased security risks. Whatever roads had existed in south-eastern Angola had been destroyed, bridges had been sabotaged, landmines were everywhere, and conditions in the region were bleak as there were no supplies. Over time however, roads improved, bridges were repaired, landmines were removed, more people arrived in the area and trading networks started up. Although south-eastern Angola remained a marginalized region for people used to Namibian standards of living, all the Angolans living in Namibia were aware of these improvements. For Cihinga, the increased possibilities did not lead to initiatives in this respect: he did not go to Angola in 2010 and never sent any letters or messages with others. His sister sent messages and money on an irregular basis during her ten years in Angola but only once a year. While in Angola, she travelled a lot and never received any news from Rundu.

A noteworthy development in communication technology in the region since 2000 has been the mobile phone. Connections between Namibia and Angola are often difficult with the network frequently being down, and a patchy coverage. All the same, Cihinga's sister uses her mobile phone to call Luanda, Menongue or Mavinga when she needs to. Texting is not used very often in the family as it is considered too complicated. Cihinga never initiates contact with his relatives in Angola but he does have regular contact with his *vavusamba* group: "If I need something which I can't get in Rundu, I phone Luis: 'Luis! Get this thing and send it to me.' And the same with him. Maybe he wants to buy river fish. He will not call his sister; he will call me and say: 'Please, buy me some fish and send it.' That's how our relationship is." This example highlights the importance of studying the introduction of new technologies and life histories in the light of the rich past of mobility patterns, community construction and legacies of disruption and crisis. This case demonstrates how communities have been radically reconstructed in the wake of war and violence. For some, this rupture was only temporary as they attempted to reconstruct community and kin connections in the post-war era. The end of the war thus formed another crucial watershed in the lives of these people. For others, the rupture of the war was experienced as permanent and its end has not brought about many changes in their daily lives.

North-western Cameroon: Grassfielders' mobility in hierarchy and the economy

As in the Angolan case, the hilly region of north-western Cameroon has a long history of mobility related to the marginality of the region in a political and economic sense. Being a minority group of Anglophones amongst Francophones in Cameroon in what is considered the core area of political opposition to the basically one-party state has been translated into a politics of contrasts and marginalization [Nyamnjoh, Konings, 2003]. It is, therefore, quite common to present Anglophone Cameroon as being marginal, both politically and economically. The region has always been relatively underdeveloped and served as a labour reservoir under colonial rule when the plantation economy on the coast was being developed, and additional labour was required. The demand for labour presented an opportunity for many from the North West Province to earn a better income. Others would try their luck in the growing urban centres where there were additional opportunities to earn a living. And later, from the 1960s onwards, people were attracted to the richer and wealthier areas of the world, and migration to Europe and the US increasingly became a part of the lives and histories of many families.

These flows of people build on a history of mobility. The North West Province, also known as the Grassfields, with its hills covered in grass, is organized in kingdoms or Fondoms. These expanded with the inclusion of large groups of strangers and "floating populations" became part of the social and political landscape. Populations were either fleeing the regime of one kingdom or the atrocities of slave-raiding groups in the north. It was only in the 20th century when colonial rule was well established that the kingdoms became sedentarized [Warnier, 1984], and established clear hierarchical structures in the areas that have become integrated in the patterns of belonging and

identity of the Grassfielders. The notion of home and belonging in the Grassfields is linked to where power is based, i.e. the palace and the king [Geschiere, 2009]. However, this has not stopped movement and mobility. On the contrary, improved roads out of the region, the introduction of schooling, the arrival of Christianity in the region, the development of the plantation economy at the coast and, later, the introduction of fixed wired communication, and recently wireless technology (in 1998), have all contributed to a dense mobile network of people who came to be known as the Grassfielders [Nyamnjoh, 1998 ; Nkwi, forthcoming; Konings, 1995]. The notion of home and belonging as related to power has become increasingly important for those who are abroad too [Geschiere, 2009]. The notion of “bush-fallers”, which is basically used to refer to the young men and women who come home at Christmas to visit their parents, shows the continuity in community (feelings of belonging) and mobility. They drive smart cars and present themselves as having made it in the other, wealthy world. They are expected to bring some of this wealth back, as is implied in the notion of bush-falling with reference to the old system of hunting and itinerant agriculture where people moved out of the village and later came back with game and a harvest [Ndjio, 2009 ; Nyamnjoh, 2011 ; Ngwa, Ngwa, 2006]. Increasing distance seems to present no rupture in the social fabric of the Grassfielders and their community formation that is, at least partly, based on hierarchical ordering. What does the intensification of communication mean for these communities and for feelings of belonging/home? On the infrastructural map of the Grassfields, the introduction of the mobile phone meant a “revolution” in terms of the new possibilities of connection. And what did this mean for communication between people and how did it inform feelings of belonging? Two forms of sociality/community in the Grassfields are discussed here: one directly related to the organization of kingdoms, the other to the daily social life of the Grassfielders, subjects of these kings.

The chiefdoms: Communities of belonging

The kings in the Grassfields would confirm that their subjects are spread all over the world. As the King of Mankon (one of the major kingdoms of the region that is recognized by the government) pointed out, not only his own children but also his subjects live in Europe, the US and in other parts of Cameroon, Nigeria and South Africa.⁸ He considers all these migrants as part of his kingdom, and in December 2009 celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of his reign clearly demonstrated its international nature with Mankon people from all over the world returning to the region to visit him. He is not the only king who considers people living abroad to be his subjects. The King of the small kingdom of Baaba used to be seen at all hours of the day under the tree outside the front door of his palace on the top of the hill, the only spot which offers access to the mobile phone network. He was calling his subjects in the US, Douala and Nigeria to ask them favours, which have since resulted in the construction of a new modern palace and the installation of a mast (in 2010) to access the network. Today, connection is no longer a problem. The kings include these international spaces as an integral part of their kingdoms and expect the symbols of their power to be reproduced. There are numerous videos of kings from the Grassfields in their traditional garments receiving people at big receptions in the US or Germany. The King of Mankon’s last visit to the US was in 2008. The King of Baaba also likes to travel and his photo albums are full of pictures taken in Italy, Germany, Belgium and the US with him looking very much at home in an international setting.

The kings note the major differences with the past when they were not able to communicate as easily and communication technologies were far more limited. Nevertheless, they argue that in the past too, they used to reach out to their subjects who lived elsewhere.

Constructing communities between home and afar

The subjects, the Grassfields families, refer to similar patterns of relating over distance and mobility, acknowledging that mobility is part and parcel of their family lives and history. The

8. Interview, September 2009. Various encounters with the King led to us being caught up in his “ruling” as he took calls from Germany and the US. He last visited these far-flung subjects in 2006. See his biography, Ndefru [2009].

testimonies of two elderly women about travelling to visit uncles and aunts who lived faraway or even to the coast to work on the plantations are examples of this.⁹ Their present stories relate how their sons and daughters are currently working in the big cities in Cameroon and their grandchildren are attending universities in Cameroon or Nigeria. The old ladies live in their houses in the village where they try to work their fields, but their mobile pasts are not very visible nowadays, and the game they brought is long gone. Every summer their grandchildren come to help them with the harvest, but contact is now limited to these visits, as they themselves cannot travel too far anymore. One of the women buried her sons in her own backyard: they died, too young, in Douala but returned “home” after death to be united with their family. The other woman had similarly experienced the deaths of her sons. Her grandchildren came planning to live with her permanently but soon left to study at university in the city where they shared rooms with other Grassfielders. The symbols of mobility in her home partly tell her story. For example, a very old kerosene lamp that she had brought from the coast to show her fellow villagers where she had been. The enthusiasm with which she recounted her stories revealed her embeddedness in the translocal. Her life experience was situated in a “Baaba” that consisted of a history of social relations or strings of people extending from Baaba, which is geographically situated in the Grassfields, to the Coast Province and Douala. The richness of her life is confined to her house today as neither she nor the other woman have mobile phones. Their stories demonstrate a rich history of translocality, wealth and home (coming back), but raises questions about the outcome. These bush-fallers returned with ideas and experiences but their material wealth has gone. Their children and grandchildren who embarked on the same pattern of mobility still have to return with their game. They are connected as always, but sparingly, through the travels of their family members.

Stories of bush-falling in the US or Europe tend to involve wealthier families. Members of some of the elite families have had the opportunity to study abroad in Nigeria or the UK and a few went to the US. Their subsequent jobs may also have involved travel as the Cameroonian government posted them to places all round the country where they would meet up with others from the Grassfields who had travelled there for trade, employment or educational purposes. The older generations are seeing their life histories repeated by their children who have also opted for studying abroad and have found employment in Germany, the US, or elsewhere. These people, now in their seventies, travel to visit their children from time to time and are in regular contact with them now that they have access to mobile phones. Nearly all of them have cell phones, which have become an everyday tool for most, often bought for them by their children living in the US. Their children are the “real” bush-fallers who are expected to come back with large game to demonstrate their connection with home. It is impossible to escape this transnational community and migrants are regularly made to feel that they belong to it. Transnational community life consists of an exchange of food, clothes, rules and politics that travel the world and fulfil the expectations of community life for these transnational Cameroonians [Ndjio, 2009; Brinkman, Lamoureaux, Merolla, de Bruijn 2010].

Mobile communities avant la lettre in the Grassfields: Urban nomads

One of the later groups to arrive in the Grassfields and be welcomed as a floating population were the Fulani. They have their own stories of mobile networks and community, albeit closely related to the infrastructural developments of the Grassfields. The Fulani nomadic cattle breeders came to the Grassfields during the 20th century when colonial policy and the kings were receiving people from Nigeria, Chad and northern Cameroon [Njeuma, Awasom, 1990 ; Pelikana, 2006]. Nomads are an example of a community that developed around strings of people instead of in a geographical location [de Bruijn, 2007] and their mobility was dictated by the moves and necessities of their cattle. Having a culture of travel (*avant la lettre*), the internalization of mobility

⁹. Interviews with two elderly women: said to be over 70 and over 100, Baaba, May/June 2010.

and thus translocality and transnationality seem obvious. The Fulani do not define their community in geographical space but in social relations that expand to cover large geographical areas, i.e. strings of people. The definition of community in this case overlaps with family relations. The social organization of the nomadic Fulani is organized in family groups that share the ownership of cattle [de Bruijn, van Dijk, 1995]. Their feelings of belonging to this mobile community have been inherited by the present generation and although forms of mobility may change, being mobile is central to being a community. Communication to bind the group together is also ancient and, as mentioned earlier, the oldest form of communication within this group is travel itself [de Bruijn 2007]. How do the modern Fulani, living in town, and whose lives are no longer related to animals, express and develop a mobile community? To answer this, we have to turn to the daily realms of Fulani family life in Bamenda, the capital of the Grassfields and part of the Kingdom of Mankon.¹⁰

Fulani family history

Habsatu's early youth was spent with her family in Banso, north of the Grassfields but her father had come to Cameroon from Nigeria in the 1920s. Habsatu herself attended school, which was quite unusual for a nomad. She left school early, however, to marry her present husband. He used to herd cattle but stopped as it involved a lot of displacement although, like Habsatu, he still owns cattle in the family's herd. He changed jobs and moved to northern Nigeria where he and Habsatu lived for about ten years before having to flee due to violence. They returned to the Grassfields to settle in Bamenda with their children, although one of them was left in Nigeria with a childless aunt. Habsatu's husband took on a driving job in Bamenda and travelled to Buea or Douala every day.

Habsatu is from a family of nine. Her sisters all live elsewhere, spread out over the Grassfields, Douala and Yaoundé. They all got married to Fulani men who are either drivers or happened to have jobs in these places. Habsatu's mother remarried after the death of her husband about fifteen years ago and moved to Sabga a small village 15 km outside Bamenda. The family meet up for Muslim ceremonies and festivities, but keep in touch with their mother almost every day by phone. One of Habsatu's uncles went to the US twenty-five years ago but this was unusual for a Fulani.

In Bamenda, Habsatu manages to earn a living from her tailoring workshop, which she established after she returned from Nigeria. It provides her with an income and has allowed her to establish a relatively wealthy lifestyle. Her children go to school and she and her husband have been able to construct a house. She travels a lot between Banso and Yaoundé but also to other places to buy Fulani cloth for her business. She is the focal point in her family's communication pattern and was among the first to buy a mobile phone shortly after the network arrived in Bamenda eleven years ago. Later she bought a mobile phone for her younger brother and for her mother so they could keep in touch regardless of the distances involved. Her sisters got them too. Habsatu felt it was necessary for her mother to call her and her sisters and also the herder of their cattle. Since 2009 she has had two phones that she carries in her handbag. She regularly calls her aunt and her daughter in Nigeria, her mother in Sabga, her sisters and younger brother, and her uncle in the US. Her customers contact her too. Life continues in the family, also at a distance. Contact is now almost daily, except when her mother visits her grandmother in the mountains where MTN, the main cell-phone provider, still has to establish a network. Her grandmother has no phone yet but does travel to the valley and, from time to time, to Bamenda.

Habsatu's uncle visited Bamenda in the summer of 2009 for the first time since he had left twenty-five years earlier. Habsatu's explanation for his visit was that their relationship had improved as a result of mobile phone contact to such a point that he had returned as a member of the family. It was now possible to re-establish links that basically existed in memory only.

Rukiatu, Habsatu's younger sister, lives in an apartment in Yaoundé. While visiting her in Yaoundé in 2008, Habsatu was constantly on the phone to her mother who asked about every detail of her day but who she also called for advice about festivities, marriage and important aspects of her daily life. In Yaoundé she was well embedded in the Fulani community from Bamenda.

¹⁰ See Keja [2009]., MA thesis based on fieldwork among the Bamenda Fulani when the student stayed at Habsatu's home.

New communication technologies, such as the mobile phone, have not changed the historical patterns of the mobile Fulani community. Relating at a distance is nothing new and is just a normal part of being a community. Changing patterns of mobility in modern Cameroon, where cattle are no longer the primary occupation of many Fulani families, have not altered the nature of the community. Instead, the new forms of communication at the disposal of the Fulani continue the relational styles of the mobile community that they have been a part of for generations. The mobile phone has been an important tool in this regard as it has reinforced relations and probably, as such, has recreated community ties that reinforce feelings of belonging to the Fulani community around the world and that are no longer only confined to the North West Province of Cameroon.

Conclusions

Mobility is a central element in transnational or translocal communities as people move and create or maintain community ties in spatial instead of local terms. Communities are to be found in diverse locations around the world and people keep in contact by various means. This article has studied the strings of people that have been created in areas that can be characterized as marginal in economic or political terms. These have led to a specific history of mobility and connection, and in such communities, the role of communication and communication technologies for the continuation, shaping and constitution of the communities should not be underestimated.

The case studies above considered the workings of the translocal – or mobile – community where people's daily lives and experiences are largely embedded in mobility. People define their community in terms of different places and in the movement of people, goods and ideas between places. Such a community can be understood as a transnational or translocal habitus [Vuorela in Bryceson, Vuorela, 2002]. The translocal is the space people live in and is the normality of everyday life, the lived space within which norms, values and rules are defined. The dynamics in a translocal habitus however are not always the same, as the case studies showed.

In the Angolan case, war and violence were seen to have disrupted patterns of community formation to an extreme degree. People's choices about maintaining contact through travel, messages and other means of communication were impaired and they were forced into new patterns of community construction. After the war, some people sought to reconstruct their former patterns of mobility and community, while the new patterns became permanent for others. The processes of actualization and imagination of community were sharply related to the history of force and choice in this region.

Change in the translocal habitus of the Cameroonian Grassfielders was more gradual and a matter of scale concerning the distances covered and the number of people travelling. Bush-falling as such has long been known. Technologies of communication have not led these communities into new dynamics of social relations but fit well in the translocal habitus. In the case studies described here, relations between social change and habitus are very different. In the Angolan case, ruptures occurred that had an impact on all aspects of everyday life, especially at the beginning of the war when people were forced to abandon community life entirely. With the arrival of peace and the new communication technologies available today, old as well as new options have become available. In the Cameroonian case, a continuation of hierarchies and power relations over distance was seen. Continuity is even stronger in the case of the Fulani with new ICT and older patterns of interaction co-existing and forming a continuous whole.

All case studies emphasized the historical dimensions of community, mobility and communication, which are different from the transnational paradigm in which mobile communities are seen as being linked to processes of globalization and new possibilities in terms of travel and communication. Here it was argued that such notions of community have existed for a long time and in world history, people have always viewed their community not so much as individuals in a particular place but as strings of people in various locations. Such strings of people are not a new phenomenon related to globalization but are deeply rooted in historical patterns of relating and community construction [de Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, Angwafu 2010 ; Hahn, Klute, 2007]. This is not to say that no changes have taken place in this respect. In contemporary constellations, state

bureaucracies and national borders are seen in tense interaction with processes of transnationality on a large scale.

Distances, communication technologies, possibilities for travel and other factors influence the degree to which people imagine or actualize the contacts within their community. Possibilities for travel may depend on financial budgets and time restrictions but are often also related to political factors. The mobile communities described here encounter borders as they are defined by state bureaucracies and between ethnic groups. However it is interesting that these borders do not function in the “working” of the mobile community as such. The kings of the Grassfields define their subjects regardless of international borders. In Angola, borders are transgressed all the time and the idea of the river is that as it flows, borders lose their meaning.

As such, communication is not a luxury only to be used when all other needs are satisfied: it is the very basis on which communities are built. Without communication, people lose connection and a community may eventually cease to exist. Close links between community and communication call for a different approach to new ICTs than has hitherto been in vogue. Instead of a focus on communication technologies, research and policies are proposed that are geared towards life histories of mobility and connections.

The case studies in this article considered inter-African communities where there is a tendency in transnationalism to stress intercontinental travel and the diaspora. The importance of travel and connections on the African continent itself were discussed, involving the less affluent and people with little education. As national borders in Africa were only fairly recently created under colonial rule, their meaning may be very different from borders elsewhere. The migratory flows of people within Africa are at present much higher in number than the relatively small groups of Africans who are travelling to Europe, the US or Asia [Bakewell, 2008]. The numbers were different in the slave-trade era but, as indicated, new ICTs offer different possibilities in the range and scope of community construction as more emerge to actively engage people overseas in community networks.

This article has sought to interpret community, mobility and communication in a historical framework. Depending on specific events, changes may be gradual or sudden. In Anderson’s work [1991, p. 36], “print capitalism” is described as making “it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways”. New communication technologies in interaction with local histories of mobility may lead to sharp ruptures, gradual changes and patterns of continuity in the dynamics of community construction.

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