Introduction:
Theory and progress of kfaang

This thesis is a social history of Kom in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. It focuses on the relationship between mobility, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social hierarchies from 1928 to 1998. It deals with how ICTs alter processes of social change, more specifically social mobility, and how the introduction and appropriation of various technologies such as motor roads, motor vehicle, the church and the school together contributed to the geographical and social mobility and social change in Kom. The significance of 1928 for this thesis lies in the fact that, according to informants, the school, St. Anthony’s Primary School, Njinikom and the church were opened in Kom in that year and they made Kom one of the first technological hubs in the Bamenda Grasslands. It was also in that year that Kom people actively participated in the construction of a new 72 kilometres-long road which linked Kom and Bamenda. In 1998 that road was upgraded when it was tarred. Consequently, the Fon, the paramount ruler of Kom, was able to visit Kom people in Bamenda in that year in his motor car, something that had not happened before.

The key concept of this study is kfaang. On it turns ICTs and mobility. To the Kom people kfaang, connotes newness – innovation and novelty in thinking and doing, and the material indicators and relationships that result from it. Kfaang maybe internally generated, but it is almost invariably externally induced. In many ways, it translates but is not limited to ‘modernity’ and ‘modernization’ in the Western sense, as things of local origin might also be labelled kfaang, even when clearly not foreign or Western. The most important characteristic of kfaang therefore is that which is ‘new’, and this might come from within or without or be something simply internally generated that is not the characteristic way of seeing and doing. Kom people accepted and appropriated it only when it was relevant in their needs. Depending upon the circumstances kfaang denotes a process and a product. Both involve change mediated by mobility and by implication the technologies which facilitated spatial and social mobility. How much did kfaang change Kom and those who embraced it? How was kfaang conceived, perceived, translated, interpreted, adapted and appropriated by Kom people?

Using Kom as a case study and focusing on the relationship between ICTs, mobility and social hierarchy, this study attempts to provide an historical perspective for understanding the social changes that have occurred in African societies between 1928 and 1998. Proceeding from the premise that the relationship between technology and society is dialectical, the argument of this thesis has been summarised in three state-
ments, namely: That the change of Kom between 1928 and 1998 was inscribed in social dynamics around the appropriation of ICTs and expressed in geographical and social mobility; that for kfaang to be anchored deeply in Kom it had to be accepted, interpreted and appropriated; and that Kom cultural identity is not essentialist but rather constructed, fluid and flexible.

Below is the profile of an informant, Benedicta, whose experience is representative of kfaang in Kom and therefore buttresses the main argument of this work.

**BENEDICTA NENG YOUNG**, is 73 years and lives in Njinikom, a village in Kom, Cameroon. She has six children—five boys and one girl. The first son lives in the United States of America. The second child lives at Fundong, another village in Kom. Her third child is a captain in the Cameroon army. The fourth child is a businessman in Njinikom. The fifth child is the only girl and a university graduate. She lives in Yaounde, the administrative capital city of Cameroon. The last son is married to a German woman and is living and studying in the Technical University, Munich of Germany.

Benedicta was born in 1937 at Njinikom (...). At a tender age she went to St. Anthony’s Primary School, Njinikom and was one among few girls. She told me that Kom people used to call the school in their language, ndo ngwali kfaang (the school of newness). When she got to standard 4 the manager of the school, Rev. Fr. Groot, decreed that girls were to further their education at the Convent School at Shisong, Nso, Cameroon some 140 km from Kom. She and other girls went to Shisong. At Shisong, she was baptised, and the new name Benedicta was given to her. By then there were no motorable roads, (ndzi kfaang). There were no vehicles (afuem a kfaang) as one will find today. There were no post offices and there were no telephones (fincha fi kfaang). Benedicta and the other girls trekked to Shisong. The journey to Shisong took Benedicta and her friends three days. When they left Njinikom they slept at Anyajua, another village in Kom, just near the (aku,a wain mum) Wain Mum’s forest. The next day they went to Oku, a neighbour of Kom and slept in the palace. The following day they reached Shisong.

At all these stops they ate food which they had carried along with them to sustain their energy (…). They also carried their personal belongings. After every three months they returned to Kom on holidays. In Shisong, Benedicta entered standard 5 in 1951 and in 1952 passed to standard 6 (...). After completing primary school in Shisong, she went to the Queen of Holy Rosary College; Onitsha, Nigeria (...). She took a car for her first time in Bamenda the capital city of Northwest Cameroon, to Mamfe, a town situated in Southwest Cameroon. Before proceeding to Nigeria via Mamfe, she had spent three days to reach Bamenda, At Bamenda she stayed at Kubou’s compound, the first Kom compound out of Kom which later became the Kom palace. She met new friends from other parts of the Cameroons but Onitsha was too far for her to continue schooling.

A school of Nursing and Midwifery was opened in Shisong. Benedicta’s parents preferred her to go to Shisong (...). She spent one year at Shisong and returned to Nigeria again for one more year. There she graduated from Abakiliki Nursing School. After graduating from Abakiliki, she got her first appointment in Cameroon with the Wum Rural Council in 1957 (...) and her next job was in Tiko, Southwest Region of Cameroon situated some 450 km from Kom with the Cameroon Development Cooperation (CDC) hospital. She worked there for 8 months, (...) applied and got admitted into the University Teaching College, Ibadan, Nigeria. She studied in Ibadan for three years, obtained her Diploma and then went to Lagos where she met Kom people and some of her classmates with whom she had schooled in Njinikom.

Benedicta returned to Cameroon in 1962 and worked with the General Hospital in Bamenda at a time when kom people in Bamenda already had their meeting and Kom Association in Old Town, (a quarter in Bamenda)at Mr. Kubou’s compound. She became a member of that Association. After a while she left her three kids with her parents in the village and went to visit her elder brother, Arnold Yongbang, in Lagos. From there she went to England for a two year course. Upon completion of her studies in England she was employed by the Cameroon public service. She worked successively at Ngoundere, Nkongsamba, Mbanga, Buea, Yaounde; Benedicta also worked in Douala and was transferred to Fuanantui, Njinikom, where she spent ten years. She retired in 1998 and was the first woman to owned a medicine store, Royal Diamond Chemist. She was also the first Kom woman to buy, owned and drive a car, Renault 4 in 1964. During her retirement she constructed her own house which appeared ‘modern’ in Kom. She maintains that Kom had changed so much from what it used to be in the 1940s and 1950s-the road had been tarred, vehicles come to Kom daily (...).
It is not too far-fetched to state that Benedicta’s career as one of the pillars of kfaang was unique. Her life raises issues of gender. In her case it seems that it was very unusual for Kom women at that time to go that far without their husbands, an issue that has not yet been given an in-depth study in the Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon. Other women who could be said to have emulated her were Fuam, who travelled out of Kom to Victoria; the royal wives from Laikom, capital of Kom, who migrated to Njinikom in the early years of Christianity and Juliana Ekwi Chambong who played a significant role in social change in Kom. Benedicta was also the first woman in Kom to own and drive a car, construct her own house and own a medicine store. Her appropriation of all those things was because she had been to school and that led to her geographical and social mobility. Her story and other women as well who were enterprising deserve a place in this thesis. They collectively and individually represent ‘new women’ or kfaang women.

The story of Benedicta and the other women shows similarities, contrast and complements with that of Anyway Ndichia Timti. His profile is also relevant to us in this thesis.

According to Kom informants, corroborated by private archival material Anyway Ndichia Timti was born at Ngwaah, another village in Kom in 1912. He never went to school but instead entered the Kom palace in 1924 as a page, nchinda, where he served until 1942. It means he served in the palace for 18 years.

In Kom tradition, nchindas who were loyal in their duties were upon living the palace rewarded with two wives by the Fon and his executive arm, nkwifoyn. Anyway was not given the two wives because it was claimed that he was stubborn. As a consequence he moved out of Kom in 1943. In 1948, Anyway sued Fon Ndi in the court, a situation that was unheard before then claiming that he had served the Fon for 18 years without pay. The Fon responded that he was not compensated because he was stubborn. The chief judge had to rule in the favour of the Fon fearing that if Anyway won then most of the NA and principles of the Indirect Rule principles would soon lost credibility.

Anyway then moved to the coastal region of Cameroon in ‘disappointment and frustration’. While at the Coast he bought farmland first in Muyuka and later in Tiko where he cultivated cocoa and coffee. He experienced and embraced kfaang as western education. In the early 1950s he was responsible for the construction of the first primary school in Fundong which he later on handed over to the Mill Hill Missionaries. Not surprisingly he sponsored children in that school and paid teachers. The missionaries were accountable to him. He died in 1965 and was buried in New Town Parish cemetery, Victoria.

Anyway Ndichia Timti complements and contrasts with that of Benedicta. He internalised kfaang and largely constituted the wave of the future through his own efforts to bring education and ‘scholarship’ which he bestowed upon pupils, and paid teachers to his people. He is also an example that shows how some of the mobile people who returned to Kom created tension with the existing indigenous hierarchy. Together with Benedicta and other several other informants such people constitute the kfaang men or kfaang women or ‘new men’/’new women’.

The colonial school, colonial church and the possibilities which they provided, accelerated the geographical and social mobility of people, accounted for cross cultural encounters and for social change. Kom was changing and so were also its people. The very names ‘Benedicta’ and ‘Anyway’ were symbolic of social change. The former was baptised with that name when she moved to Shisong and Anyway was baptised in Victoria. But the question is how deeply was she and other many people changed by being baptised with such new names?
According to Benedicta and other informants, Kom people came to brand things from outside as ‘newness’, kfaang. This newness was contrasted with what was traditional and indigenous but similar to ‘modernity’. Did Benedicta’s experience exemplify what Kom people saw and perceived as modernity? Or did kfaang mean something deeper than modernity? The next section attempts to answer these questions and thus set the stage for a discussion of communication technology and mobility as phenomena of kfaang. Thus the equation, Technology + Mobility = Social Change, and thus also the emic understanding of kfaang.

Tradition and modernity in kfaang

According to Fo Angwafo (2009: 70), ‘we are actively modernising our tradition and traditionalising our modernity’. These words seemed to best describe the concept of kfaang. The historicity of modernity and modernisation seems to be entangled within the European experience which ignored Africa as part of the globe. Modernisation was rooted in post-enlightenment Europe and was defended on the grounds of its change of European society from an agrarian to an industrial one.

In all these, its apologists strongly held that such change did not occur in African societies because they were understood to be static and their people were primitive hunter gatherers. This was just another way of denying Africa’s great indigenous achievements (Depelchin, 2005: 19-28). Enough literature however exists to show that Africa, especially from the 19th century, was part of the global processes (Wallerstein, 1986 and 2005; Forde and Kaberry, 1967; Ranger, 1963; Vansina, 1966; Oliver & Mathew, 1963; Thornton, 1992; Eltis, 1993). As Ferguson (1999: 14) has argued ‘the modernisation myth was bad social science because it was restricted and even so based on misconceptions about modern African history’. In other words, modernisation was not as it was claimed, because Africa was not considered as part of the global processes. Fundamental to the understanding of modernisation is the fact that for any meaningful change to take place in any society the movement of people, ideas and cultures is necessary and there should be social and political reorganisation of that society. Modernisation can in some ways be understood through the development of ICTs and forms of mobility.

As the concept ‘modernisation’ was justified as a European and North American idea, so modernity is seen as something that was uniquely European. It was carried overseas and imposed on Africans by the Europeans. Over the years scholars have written about modernity from different perspectives (see Ferguson, 1999; Appadurai, 1986; Fardon et al., 1999; Geschier et al., 2008; Havik, 2009; Brinkman et al., 2009; Giddens, 1990; Macamo, 2005; Deutsch et al., 2002; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993).

The literature on modernity suggests that it is a problematic term and when seen through analytical ‘binoculars it is quite slippery ambiguous and vague’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993: xii), because it seems that different societies and communities have their own way of perceiving and understanding the concept which has been largely coloured by being too ‘closely connected to western ideologies of universal development’. In other words, modernity can best be understood if we contextualize it in different world societies because there are peculiar ways of understanding and perceiving it. What it means for one society might not necessary mean the same for another one.

Two scholars whose use of the concept has partially inspired me are Cooper (2005: 176-193) and Ferguson (2006: 176-193). According to Cooper, ‘the most ordinary
meaning of modern (ity) is that which is new, that which is distinguishable from the past’. This seems a better way of looking at the concept, but Cooper does not say anything about the contents of modernity or the socio-cultural and economic impact of that phenomenon on changing societies. While leaning on other scholars, Ferguson went further than Cooper. According to him, ‘(…) modern Africa is today understood as a place of bricolage and creative invention where bits and pieces of what used to be called western modernity are picked up, combined with local resources and put back together’. By implication, Ferguson meant that modernity was not a ‘one way traffic concept’. It is applicable when it combines what is indigenous and foreign.

To Kom people, modernity is understood as newness and they called it kfaang. This modernity, reflected in Benedicta’s story and those of other informants, has to be accepted, translated, interpreted, adapted and appropriated by the people. It has a socio-economic and political impact on a society like Kom by changing and creating new social hierarchies. For Kom people, kfaang was not uprooted elsewhere and transplanted into their society. Kom people only accepted kfaang because it had relevance to them and their society and, more importantly, it was acquired their geographical and social mobility. The mobility of Kom people introduced kfaang in Kom. This was not only because the people were able to navigate and negotiate with their different global encounters abroad and at home, but also with what was internally generated and invariably externally induced.

It goes without saying that to anchor kfaang Kom people did not have to abandon all their traditions. The hybrid was not something totally new, neither was it totally old. As Ferguson tells us, it is selecting bits of the foreign and blending it with what is indigenous without dramatically disrupting the stability of the society. According to Comaroff & Comaroff (1992: 112) ‘new political cultures were born from countless couplings of local and global worlds, from intersecting histories that refocused European values and intentions, thus rerouting, if not reversing, the march of modernity. This great historical process was also instrumental in remaking economy and society at home’. As excellent as this appears, it does not specify the contents of modernity.

As a result kfaang was not a zero-sum game, neither was it a ‘winner takes all’ one. Cross-culturalism and conviviality played a central role for kfaang to be understood and accepted in Kom. This meant that spaces were created in the process for the two cultural worlds to survive. Kfaang had to be relevant in context. The content of kfaang constituted, ndzi kfaang or new roads, afuem a kfaang carpenter bee of newness which was the motor vehicle, the new school, (ndo ngwali kfaang) the new church, (iwo fiyini fyie kfaang) new trees, (ghii ka mghii kfaang) new clothes, (dzisi kfaang) new plates, (ghii kang-a-kfaang) new spoons, (ghii tuass-ghi-kfaang) to name only a few. Most of the carriers of kfaang were mobile people and those who accessed kfaang like education and schooling became very ‘mobile’ and this changed their status. They went to school because schooling was relevant to their context.

The case for the relevance of kfaang is captured in the Song of Lawino by Okot p’Bitek. Although not writing from the perspective of Kom and kfaang, p’Bitek (1966: 13-17) enables us to better understand and drive home the point which we are making here. At one point, the author puts the words in the mouth of an ‘uneducated’ woman in the western sense whose husband was well educated. The husband tends to abuse the wife and in-laws in very impeccable English telling them that ‘they have eyes but cannot see; ears but cannot hear and cannot understand the Bible (…).’ In other words people who appropriated kfaang did so because it was relevant to their needs. Why
should somebody go to school or church when he or she does not see the relevance? Against this background there is no better way to understand kfaang, than the words of Fo Angwafør, ‘(…) our modernity only makes sense to the extent that it is firmly grounded in our traditions’ (Fo Angwafør, 2009: 70). By and large, in this work kfaang means consciously indigenising our modernities and modernising our indigeneity. Unlike the Fon of Kom, Fo Angwafør, is educated and reflects what happened in his Fondom and other Fondoms of the region like Kom. In doing so he is more explicit in the way he expresses his view.

Accordingly, kfaang has been used all through this work as a negotiated process resulting from global and local encounters through geographical and social mobility of Kom people. The definition of modernity by scholars to mean the same thing to different societies is not confirmed by Kom experience. Kom experience of kfaang as exemplified by Benedicta and other Kom informants is different. Although in most circumstances kfaang was alien, in origin, it is important to emphasise that to be exposed to it there must be a degree of social and physical mobility. Was the role played by kfaang in the change of Kom and its people deep or superficial? What was the impact of appropriating kfaang on Kom cultural identity or ‘Komness’? How resistant or receptive were Kom people to kfaang? In other words, were the ‘carriers’ of kfaang in Kom completely assimilated into kfaang to the same degree as Europeans? This study attempts to answer these questions and that attempt begins with a discussion of the other two key concepts, namely ICTs and mobility.

Information communication technology (ICT)

With the advent of new ICTs like the internet, cell phones, and computers, there has been much attention paid to the subject by many scholars. Yet very little has been researched on the historical perspective of ICTs. Nyamnjoh (1998: 42-57) provided an inventory of indigenous instruments of ICTs in Cameroon which included the talking drums, bahama grass, boundary stems and royal spears. Gewald (2002: 257-285) researched the impact of the introduction of the motor car amongst the Hereros of Namibia, while Andah (1992) provided an inventory of Nigeria’s indigenous technologies. Andah (1992: 5) describes indigenous technology in such basic facets of life as food production, medicine, architecture and domestic/industrial crafts as against the backdrop of dynamic historical settings.

Communication technology is defined here as simply technology that eases social mobility and denotes those novelties such as roads, vehicles, school and the churches which informants like Benedicta perceived as kfaang.

According to Benedicta, she attended St. Anthony’s Primary School and later went to Shisong because the Rev. Fr. Groot ‘decreed’ girls should continue there. She went with her classmates, who were also girls. She later schooled in Nigeria and United Kingdom and at each of these places she met some of her classmates from Kom. School was a particular form of technology. If the aim of the technology is to connect, disconnect and also to transform the society then it is reasonable to consider school as a technology. Moreover, Kom people saw these technologies as newness and progress. So also are cell phones and internet today seen as newness and progress, although still debatable. For many people and societies, technology means to be forward-looking and progressive. In addition to schools, other forms of technology like the churches, the roads and motor
vehicles are seen as technologies. They were first of all accepted, then appropriated and made useful in the social context of Kom.

Most literature on technology focuses on new technologies such as the internet, computers and engines. Some scholars have studied ICTs in the light of politics to show how they accelerate democracy in Africa (Ochara, 2009). Conversely, Soltane (2004) and others have demonstrated how ICTs could interfere in governing processes. They have invented new terminologies such as E-governance, cyber-democracy, digital democracy and E-participation. Bhoomi (2009) made a similar study in India which focuses on e-governance and the right to information for this purpose. Ochara (2009), Navarra & Cornford (2009) also conducted a similar study in Kenya in which they examined the government policy of flexibility in an e-government project. Their conclusions are that the new technologies have revolutionised and improved in many ways the way governance is executed.

Teferra (2004) carried out research on how knowledge could be produced and distributed in African universities using ICTs. The author also examines how the ICTs are affecting teaching, research and other scholarly activities that have long remained under-studied in African educational systems. The author concludes that ‘there is a strong belief that a solid and reliable ICT infrastructure can serve as a panacea to many of the problems and ills of scientific communication, and in particular for scientific research as a whole’. Beebe et al. (2003), provide a discussion of Africa’s higher education environment and the importance of ICT for academics, professionals and policy makers. Others like James (2004), Rubens and du Plessis, (2004: 16-32) and Unwin, (2004: 150-160) have studied the internet as technology. So far these works have focused on new technologies. They tend to see ICTs only in terms of the internet, mobile phone and computers. Their main shortcoming has been their failure to go beyond new technologies. Again, their conclusions indicate progress in education as result of the introduction of new technologies.

Discussions with Benedicta and other Kom informants and the readings of the literature on ICT demonstrate that technology cannot be reduced to hardware, spanners, internet, computers and engines but further shows the relationship between technology and society. Scholars like Callon (1986), Latour (1989), Callon & Law (1989) and Jones & Graham (2003) have fully developed the relationship between technology and society in what they called the Actor-Network (ANT) theory in their research programme at the École des Mines in Paris. But this thesis is not only about technology per se. It is about technology and mobility and how the former is useful for the latter.

In the light of the above, this thesis attempts to consider technology in the following ways: First, how Technology shapes society on one hand and on the other how it domesticates and shapes the technology. The technology would have no meaning if the society failed to accept and contextualize it. Second, how technology consists not only of gadgets and things like engines, iron tools and spanners or cell phones, internet, computers, hardware and software but also new institutions and techniques introduced into Kom which are, accommodated and made socially useful, meaningful and relevant to the society. Third, how technology helps to further promote social change of a society at the social, political, and even economic and individual levels and raises questions about the identity of those who appropriate it. Fourth, how technology has meaning when it is used in relation to something. Machines can be technology but only when they are socially shaped. We might call that the ‘social shaping of technology’ (SCOT), to borrow an acronym from Pinch & Bijker (1989). This means that even when
technology is a metal tool; it needs to be socially constructed, meaning that people have to re-shape it in order to make its usefulness adapt to their context. Technology therefore is dynamic and not static. The fact that this thesis is about layers of technologies which according to Kom people included churches, schools, motor vehicles and the roads goes closer to Headrick (1986: 4-5), who maintains that:

(...) the history of technology once consisted of nuts and bolts; stories of great inventors and famous engineers. Today technologies are no longer viewed as ‘externalities’ that arise fortuitously from the minds, geniuses, but as an intrinsic part of the culture and economy of every society (...) the work of the social historian of technology is to study the economic and cultural context in which innovations arise and, in turn, their impact upon the societies in which they appear.

In this thesis viewing technology as Headrick does was inspired by the ideas of other scholars. For example, Armstrong (2004: 10-11) has defined technology thus:

The phrase has become so fashionable that it is at times misunderstood. Some people used it at times to mean only new technologies like the internet, satellite based communications, cellular phones and computer systems. ICTs in reality have been around a long time since long before the first satellite were put up into the orbit, and even long before the computer was invented so to speak of the ICT only in terms of the new technology will do more harm than good. Take the IT from Information Technology and put a ‘C’ in the middle for communication. And that is Information Communication Technology. To talk about the IT is to talk about exclusively the hardware, the systems, the platforms and infrastructures. To talk of the ICT is to talk also about what animates the IT-communication, the content, the stuff flowing through the pipes.

Armstrong very strongly upholds this view of ICTs. He does not consider ICTs as something radically new and unprecedented. He enumerates a long list of what he thinks make up ICTs. They are Internet and Internet/e-mail technologies, satellites, satellite receivers/uplinks and satellite technologies, phone handsets, telephone infrastructure (wire and wireless), telephone technologies/platforms, computer hardware and soft hardware, computer printers, scanners, disks, and flash drives. There are also fax machines, facsimile technology, cameras (still and video, analogue and digital), television sets and TV broadcasting systems films, Morse code, telegraph, telex, the printing press, paper with ink and carbon. Armstrong’s view comes closer to the view of technology as used in this study.

Pinch & Bijker (1989: 30) and Bijker (1995) maintain that the key requirement of social construction of technology ‘is that all members of a certain social group share the same set of meanings attached to a specific artefact (...) we must first ask whether the artefact has any meaning at all for the members of the social group under investigation’. Law & Bijker (1992: 11) and Wallace (1982) maintain that technology is ever-present and has something to do with people both at work places and at home. According to these scholars, ‘The study of technology, then, has immediate political and social relevance. And to be sure because technology is treated as one of the major motors of economic growth; it has similar economic and policy relevance’ (Law & Bijker, 1992: 11).

Mobility

The story of Benedicta as well as of Anyway is about geographical and social mobility. Human beings are mobile beings and mobility is an old phenomenon. People in Africa have always been mobile and their mobility might be as old as humanity itself. Scholars have studied mobility from many perspectives. For instance, Amin (1974) shows that migrations are not new to Africa. According to him, modern migrations are related to
labour problems and he classifies them as: rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural, internal and international migrations. Adepoju (1995, 2010, 2008 and 2007) claims that ‘Africa is a continent of considerable (...) migrations and various movements in response to political, social, economic, religious and security situations have been recorded from earliest times’. De Bruijn & van Dijk (2003) and Waller (1985), studied population mobility in West Africa with a special focus on the Fulbe pastoralists of Central and South Mali. They came to the conclusion that ‘mobility was one of the most important responses by the inhabitants of the Sahel to climatic adversity’. These scholars have collectively and individually studied mobility in terms of travelling or migratory cultures.

In 2008, Benedicta was just one of the many Kom who had had similar experiences with mobility. Anyway too had similar experiences but died early in 1965. However, Benedicta’s story showed that women too were effectively mobile in their own right contrary to what most of the literature shows. It was important to know why illiterate Kom such as Anyway Ndichia travelled outside Kom, what became of them and how they differed from so-called educated Kom when kfaang was concerned. Benedicta’s story seems to suggest that mobility and social change are directly correlated. Although change and mobility are inherent features of societies something else is needed to trigger social change in the society. St. Anthony’s school which Benedicta mentioned, known in Kom as ndo gwali kfaang, was one such a trigger.

A majority of the people in the area had no schooling, but Kom experienced new, significant social changes during approximately seventy years, to judge by her story (1928-1998). It could also be gathered from her that Kom people formed associations like the one in Bamenda, of which she was a member. Indirectly, her story touched on the relationship between school and her geographical and social mobility. This makes one re-think and re-focus one’s view of the concept of mobility, school and the people who appropriated them and what they became in their societies. It seems certain that the school, the church, the motor road, the motor vehicle which she mentioned in her narrative and which had reached Kom society by 1928, could be rightly seen as technologies, and were partly but also instrumentally responsible for certain social changes in Kom.

The mobility of people inside Africa has been a major issue for scholars who have studied it in multiple perspectives. But the advent of new ICTs in most societies in Africa has accelerated the geographical mobility of people. At the same time the movement of people across borders has become a daily problem to statesmen and governments. Consequently, there is a need to study these changes from an historical perspective. Scholars have shown that the factors responsible for these migrations differ but that the outstanding factor since the beginnings of the colonial rule has been labour. For instance, Harris’ (1994) work on the migrant labour from Mozambique to the sugarcane plantations, diamond and gold mines of South Africa shows how these migrants arrived in South Africa with different values. But their contacts with other Africans and whites enabled them to forge a new type of culture. Davidson’s work on migrant labour in the Gold Coast (Davidson, 1954) and van Onselen’s (1984) on Southern Africa show the relationship which existed between labour migration and different forms of communication and labour identity in Southern Rhodesia between 1900 and 1933. What is important in the work by Harris, Davidson and van Onselen, apart from labour migration, is the construction of a dynamic culture which was a synthesis or hybrid of the migrant culture and that of South Africa. This is true of
Benedicta and Kom people. A new Kom culture was created by the ability of Kom to re-construct their culture in the midst of other cultures as they migrated to distant geographical spaces. To what extent, then, did Kom people succeed in maintaining their cultural values and norms in the course of their geographical mobility? Did their identity remain essentialist, bounded in nature, in time and space?

It is necessary to consider whether mobility can be fully understood without giving it a historical dimension. History is useful for a fuller understanding of present day change in societies, especially because it helps us to better understand and explain current events by relating them to the past. Could history alone provide an accurate photo of the social changes in Kom since 1928? By answering these questions and several others, this thesis contributes to the existing knowledge of Kom, Cameroon and specifically to an understanding of the relationship between society, technology and mobility and how they combined to transform Kom society.

The story of Benedicta shows that her mobility seems to open a new perspective that has not been adequately treated, in the literature on mobility in Bamenda Grasslands of Cameroon – the attempt of Kom people to create a place which resembles home out of home in the course of their spatial mobility. Although her story is linked to labour from when she was employed, it is the special labour of schooling and its aftermath. Forster (1965) and Berry (1986) have done some work on mobility and education in Ghana and Western Nigeria respectively. The works of de Bruijn & van Dijk and many others are about movements due to ecological crisis and how the Fulbes deal with this type of adversity.

While in school in Nso, Nigeria or the United Kingdom, Benedicta always returned home on holidays, and while in Bamenda she was a member of the Kom Association that met at Kubou’s compound. Kubou was the first Kom man to build a home in Bamenda in the 1920s. From her story and those of many other informants, one can rightly conclude that school was one of the factors which played a decisive role in the geographical and social mobility of Kom people.

The Kom Association in Bamenda, is an example of the way the people moved. Once out of home they started re-creating their culture by staying in touch with their home villages. Benedicta’s life is a story of what Appadurai calls ‘Translocality’. According to Appadurai (1996: 178), ‘Translocality is understood as an ambiguous space of experiences and agency, a space that does not exist absolutely but is created by interconnections of mobile people, ideas and objects’. In other words, Kom people were creating a space which resembled their place of origin, Kom, in terms of cultural practices like traditional dances, dress and festivals. The geographical mobility of Kom people appeared to have been what Gupta & Ferguson (1992: 17) call ‘de-territorialisation and territorialisation’. These terms have to do with spatial mobility. They suggest that because of flexible mobility people are not confined to particular places. People can now move and recreate their territory of origin in distant spaces. This appears relevant to Kom experiences because as they moved out they de-territorialised Kom and re-territorialised it in distant places.

Another striking insight from discussions with Benedicta was the way she viewed her village from the distance of urban spaces. This was characteristic of Kom people as well as other peoples in Africa. Rural-urban relations are an age-old theme that has been explored in the literature of migration in Africa. Busia (1950: 12) in a social survey of Sekondi-Takoradi, showed that ‘a person’s membership of a lineage binds him forever to his village, its locality and that wherever he may go; however long he/she may be
away, he/she belongs to his lineage town or village (...’). Gugler (1961) studied Eastern Nigerians in town and concluded that they lived in a dual system in which they were responsible to village development associations while trying to cope with city life. Geschiere & Gugler (1998: 309-319) show how an urbanite might choose to remain in the city but also always remain tied in some way with his or her home. Gugler (2002: 21-41) maintains that research on the urban-rural connection needs to be conducted elsewhere on the continent because of the ‘wrenching changes its people have experienced over the last generation’. Geschiere, Busia and Gugler here were only setting the agenda for scholars to study rural-urban migrations in Africa. The experience of Kom people is just one contribution to this ongoing works.

In Cameroon this kind of rural-urban mobility takes place through associations such as the one which Benedicta and many others informed us about. These associations of mobile people are home town groupings through which members are called upon to actively participate in home developmental projects. These associations enjoyed the renewed attention of scholars of contemporary Cameroon, particularly in connection with identity studies and politics of belonging since the 1990s (See Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998: 320-337; Englund, 2002: 137-154; Gam Nkwi, 2006c: 123-143).

These studies on rural-urban mobility are still relevant today. However, their conclusions can be re-examined and their scope enlarged by incorporating the social history of those they have studied. How did these people in town or in the city try to recreate and re-invent themselves and in what specific ways did they relate to their home villages? The story of Benedicta and Kubou’s compound indicates that there was something intrinsic in the construction of Kom out of Kom which has not yet been given adequate attention by historians. That phenomenon is known as ‘Komness’ and needs to be studied.

‘Komness’, it is gathered from the experience of Benedicta and other informants, concerns identity – the characteristic which Kom people hold on to, even when they are in distant spaces. It is the ‘core culture’ of Kom people. From Benedicta’s story, one learns that it consists of language, food, traditional dress and festivals. Benedicta and others, while they lived out of Kom, reconstructed the classical Kom culture. After a number of years away from home they re-shaped the original, and negotiated themselves with others. As a result, therefore, Kom people are always involved in a creative process by re-shaping what was originally ‘classical’ Kom. ‘Komness’ therefore will refer to a set of values, norms and practices. Kom people moved away from home to places like Bamenda, Victoria, Kumba and Tiko. They appeared changed but at the same time retained some aspects ‘Komness’. From Benedicta and other informants, it could be deduced that no matter how a Kom person imbibed kfaang, ‘Komness’ was still cherished and sustained.

The mobility of Kom people was spatial, social, external and internal. By spatial mobility we mean the physical movement of Kom people. In the course of their mobility many things happened. The story of Kubou’s compound shows how Kom people in their geographical mobility created belongingness and a representation of Kom identity in diasporic spaces. The term ‘diasporic places’ needs further explanation and clarification. Diaspora has come to mean mainly Africans living outside of Africa, and little research has been done so far on diasporic migrants living within Africa. The term here is used to denote Kom migrants who lived at Kubou’s compound and those who ventured to other parts of coastal Cameroon. The term was given further clarification and meaning by Bakewell (2008) who argued that ‘very little research has been
done on diaspora in the African continent. Africa is a continent which generates diasporas rather than one in which diasporas can be found’. Bakewell was alluding to the internal or continental diaspora which has not been adequately studied by scholars with an interest in migration. In this thesis, the specific diaspora denotes mobile Kom population found within Cameroon Grasslands, especially in Bamenda because it was in Bamenda that the first Kom Association was formed. Occasionally, it will refer to the coastal plantations. Social mobility is defined here as upward mobility or change for the better change in social status.

De Bruijn et al. (2001: 1) state that ‘mobility is engrained in the history, daily life and experiences of people (...) mobility as an umbrella term encompasses all types of movement including travel, exploration, migration, tourism, refugeeism, pastoralism, nomadism, pilgrimage and trade’. In a similar vein, de Bruijn et al. (2001: 65) have also studied the movement of ideas through ‘cultures of travel amongst the Fulbe pastoralists in central Mali and Pentecostalism in Ghana. They have demonstrated in both cases that ‘mobility has acquired momentum in itself that may be labelled a culture of travel. A field of practices, institutions, and ideas and reflections related to mobility and travelling, which has acquired a specific dynamism of its own, has arisen out of interaction with conditions on the ground’. According to Urry (2000) mobility is not only about people moving but also of objects and ideas.

The geographical mobility of Kom people as exemplified by Benedicta and other informants was rural-rural; rural-urban and urban-rural. To a large extent it was internal mobility going beyond Bamenda. From 1928 to c. 1961 they went as far as Kumba, Tiko, Victoria, Nkongsamba and some parts of Nigeria like Yola, Ibi, Onitsha and Calabar. From 1961 to 1998, with improvements in road and information communication coupled with the civil administration policies regarding the transfer of civil servants, they moved to many more parts of Cameroon which do not fall within the scope of this work. In addition to the concepts which are central to this thesis, there are the concepts of social hierarchies and identity which are known here as the ‘construction of society’, to which we now turn our attention.

The ‘construction of society’

The way a society is constructed and changes shows that people always create and recreate different statuses which are hierarchical. This evolution of new hierarchies in different circumstances comes about as a result of innovative changes in the society. The change might be because of the way a society is structured. Often social or power relations change but all these are based on the existing structures in the society. Power relations reflect hierarchies and the organization of the society. The way the society is structured determines social relations. In more recent times the class of people who appropriated different types of wealth were those who were schooled and also those who moved out of the society for ‘greener pastures’, such as the youth. These people translated their social connections into identity. Consequently, who a person is in the society is defined by his or her social relations with who or what. Thus, identity and belonging as well as identity and power positions determine the status of social hierarchies in a particular society.

Benedicta’s story is quite revealing: It shows how she had changed. What explains this change is her physical mobility, first by appropriating education and schooling. She was one amongst many people to do so and she and many other people were able to
leave home because of schooling. Schooling determined her spatial and social mobility and that of many others, since those who went to school acquired a specific status. They were the ones who were able to access and appropriate this particular technology and through it assume different identities and achieve positions of power and influence in the society.

Those who did not go to school were also geographically mobile for different reasons. They took a different path such as going to coastal Cameroon to work in the plantations. Others bought farms and employed wage labour. For example in 1955, James Nsah became the first Kom person to buy a motor car. Nsah henceforth belonged to another class and rose to a different social status not because he had been to school but because of economic achievement. Many such cases existed in Kom. Those who went to school identified themselves with school and that experience connected them.

Identity is a complex concept and appears to have gained its prominence only in modern sociological thought. Sociologists dealing with that concept in the 1970s were pre-occupied with the ‘me’ in trying to investigate the avenues through which interpersonal relations created the self in an individual. Cooper & Brubaker (2005: 51-91), writing on identity, maintain that ‘everybody seeks an identity’, adding that ‘identity is fluid, constructed and contested’. In other words identity is not bounded or rigid. It is created. The authors argue ‘not for a more precise word to replace identity but rather for the use of a range of conceptual tools adequate to understand a range of practices and processes’ concerning identities. According to Cerulo (1997: 385-409), ‘many works have tended to refocus what obtained in the 1970s by shifting attention from the individual to the collective identities’ (see also Vubo & Ngwa,2001: 163-190; Durham, 2000: 113-120; Kunovich, 2006: 435-460; Harner, 2001: 660-680; Mokake, 2010: 71-80). While agreeing with Cerulo and others who belong to this school of thought, this thesis also examines different types of identity. Those who appropriated different technologies and moved in different directions assumed new identities which collectively integrated them into ‘Komness’.

This thesis is not interested in identities per se but in the way Kom identity has developed in time and space with Kom people. Benedicta’s story is quite revealing: It shows how she had changed. What primarily explains this change is her physical mobility made possible by her appropriation of schooling. She was one amongst a number of people to do so, and such people left Kom because of that schooling. It could be said that schooling determined her mobility and that of many others. Those who went to school belonged to a specific status. They were the ones who were able to appropriate this particular technology and therefore assume different identities and achieve positions of power in society (for more on power see Dowding, 1996; Di Gaetano & Klemanski, 1999; Chabal, 1994).

As already mentioned, some individuals achieved a new status not by schooling. They also became geographically mobile by relocating to the coastal Cameroons to work in the plantations. Some were able subsequently to buy farm land and employ wage labour. For example, Anyway Ndichia Timti went to the coast, acquired farms, cultivated cash crops, and saved money. Back in Kom he sponsored the construction of a school and paid teachers and pupils from his own pocket before handing over the school to the missionaries. He thus changed to another class and henceforth rose to a higher status – not because he had been to school but because he had promoted kfaang in a special way among his people. Many such cases could be found in Kom.
Those who went to school identified themselves with school which connected them to others who went to the coast and got to know each other.

Identity therefore seems to have gone with networks. Today, the term social networking suggests the results of fast moving technologies and services like weblogs, MySpace, or You Tube. Without doubt, the concept of social networks far predates these electronic technologies that have only enabled one new aspect of them. This thesis argues that a social network is a grouping or loosely connected web of individuals bound by one or more specific interests or interdependencies. Scholars like Breiger (2004), Lin (1999), Cook & Whitmeyer (1992) and Gargiulo & Benassi (1998) have already paved the way by studying these networks. Like them this thesis attempts to contribute towards the understanding of networks, in this case by studying how Kom peoples’ mobility was achieved in a coordinated manner.

The Georgian novelist, Henry Fielding (1973: 218), once remarked that he depicted species and not individuals. While in the field we followed the people and their itineraries that together formed Kom society. Kom informants cited in this thesis were a representation of Kom geographical and social mobility. This thesis depicts not only individuals but also processes and the dynamics of a society. The individual however matters. Individual stories are significant but only when linked to the process and how they came to understand and perceive social change within their own society. The fundamental interest here is how the society has functioned over time and space with the focus on social change. This implies networks, changing social relations, as well as changing identities or changes of the self.

Finally, it should be noted that the appropriation of technology is generational. That fact has to do with history, power, wealth, and geographical and social mobility. Generational relations are reflected in the way the youth appropriated various technologies not available to the older generation (although the latter in turn had also appropriated various technologies when they were young). Consequently, the old and the young were interviewed. But it was the youth of their time who were most involved in the major geographical and social mobility characteristic of the period under consideration.

Structure of the thesis

This study comprises nine chapters. Chapter One introduces the study area, the recent social developments among the Kom people with respect to innovation, social change and mobility, and the conceptual issues of relevance. Chapter Two focuses on the various methods which were used in this work regarding archival research and oral history.

Chapter Three situates Kom in the global communication ecology. In order to understand local processes it is also important to locate them in a global setting. The chapter argues that within the context of global connections and interconnections Kom was an integral part, and these connections and resulting mobility existed long before the colonial period due to ecological, trade, kinship situations and the social, political and economic context in which Kom was located. The chapter also provides a chronological survey of Kom history from c. 1928 to 1998 and further argues that key social and economic processes produced social and political hierarchies which were disrupted, reinforced and or curtailed by colonialism. Through connection and interconnection Kom came into contact with distant places and cultures. This chapter examines how Kom identity as a geographical entity was constructed.
Chapters Four and Five deal with tangible technologies and their relationship to the geographical mobility of people. The crux of Chapter Four is the ‘road’ of newness (ndzi kfaang). It shows how road construction increased the geographical mobility of Kom people out of the region. It shows that the Fon participated in the construction of the road as the Native Authority (NA) of the region while the colonial authorities justified the construction of the road as necessary for exporting raw materials. The chapter describes how the construction of the road in Kom was accepted and interpreted by Kom people. At the end of 1959, Kom was at least linked to a motorable road. Did it mean the end of bridle paths? Or what were the immediate impacts of the motorable road on Kom and the mobility of its people?

In connection with questions in Chapter Four, Chapter Five examines the first motor vehicle (afu em a kfaang) bought and owned by a Kom man in 1955. Not everybody could become a vehicle owner. How did this man and his family become a vehicle owner? No doubt because he was mobile, acquired farmlands in Kumba and employed farm labour. He therefore earned his money from some profitable occupation in the coast which enabled him to buy a car. How was the vehicle as technology ‘domesticated’ in Kom? What was the impact of the vehicle and how did it influence the emergence of new social hierarchies? This chapter argues that a ‘regime’ was developed around the vehicle as it did around technologies. By a regime we mean the various people who identified themselves with the vehicle owner and also those who were workers in the transportation business like drivers, motor boys, charterers and mechanics. Once the vehicle arrived, a new social class controlling mobility emerged.

If the motor vehicle was a tangible technology, the church was not. Chapters Six and Seven deal with the school and the church as technologies which led to identity and social hierarchy formation. Chapter Six discusses the introduction of the church (ndo fiyini kfaang), in c. 1928. It focuses on the church as a technology and examines the broad changes which resulted from it. What was the status of people who appropriated the church? How did the church as an institution influence their geographical and social mobility? The position of the Fon who negotiated the coming of the church to Kom forms part of the chapter. The church was therefore crucial to the formation of new social identities and belonging as well as new socio-political hierarchies in Kom. The chapter questions how the church contributed to geographical and social mobility, and how for some people geographical mobility brought long lasting changes.

Chapters Six and Seven form the core of this study. Chapter Seven discusses another form of technology namely, the school (ndo ngwali kfaang) and examines how some Kom people were able to appropriate that technology and how teachers, for example, became very mobile as a result of schooling. The chapter examines the story of Anyway Ndichia Timti who contributed to the construction of schools and paid teachers and pupils but who himself never went to school. They highlight his admiration for kfaang which he brought to his people. The chapter also shows how certain individuals were at the centre of societal change. The role of some of the first women who went to school and became teachers is also discussed. Finally, the two chapters show the creation of identity and belonging as a result of schooling.

Unlike Chapters Four to Seven in which technology is central to the discussion of mobility, Chapter Eight examines kfaang. It examines what newness meant to Kom people and also how Kom people adapted to the challenge of newness. The chapter is organised around the argument that when Kom people travelled away from home they came into contact with different environments, peoples and cultures. This began in
Kubou’s compound in Bamenda which was more or less ‘the gateway’ to several other places. Some Kom went to Nkongsamba, others to the coastal region of Cameroon and to Yola in Northern Nigeria. The central argument in this chapter is how Kom people in their geographical mobility attempted to recreate Kom in diasporic spaces. In this connection, the ideas of culture, identity and belonging are quite central. Thus the chapter examines place as a product of social space because the people share identity. How were these people perceived by people back in Kom? In this section we realise how the mental ‘maps’ of Kom men and women were constantly changing. The section ends with a geographical map which shows the different places which Kom visited in the course of their geographical mobility. It illustrates an extreme case of identity and belonging and questions how real identities could be, using Kom as a case study.

Chapter Nine is the conclusion of the study. It synthesises the main conclusions of the thesis, showing how technology and mobility interact in the society producing different layers of hierarchies, identity and belonging to transform a particular society. It also attempts to resolve the puzzle of total change and ‘kfaangness’ which the thesis has sustained all along.