Conclusion:
Kom identity, a work in progress

This thesis is about spatial and social mobility amongst Kom of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon, about kfaang and its technologies and how these interrelated and impacted on Kom and ‘Komness’. Taking its point of departure from discussions with Benedicta and other informants mentioned at the beginning of the work, kfaang is seen as concept which binds together the chapters of the thesis. Kfaang consists of ‘technologies’ that come from far ‘outside’, as well as those emanating from the ‘distant local.’ ‘Distant local’ refers to the localities of most import for those Kom people venturing outside of the kingdom, and from where many new things came. Such places included Bamenda, the Coastal region of Cameroon, Nkongsamba, and Nigeria itself. These things – commodities, institutions, ideas, and so on – were deeply related to social change in Kom. Mobility was part of that transformation which turned Kom into what scholars describe today as a transnational or trans-local community. Kom geographical mobility is one with a very long history which has enveloped Kom within what can be described as a ‘mobile culture’ or ‘travelling culture’. I have tried to examine the intense relationship of the layers of mobility to newness and technologies. The thesis has tried to show the interrelation between technology and geographical and social mobility. It has also traced the way that this interrelationship has led to social change. Both change and continuity characterise social hierarchies within the Kom indigenous group. A cultural dynamic, here termed ‘Komness’, has integrated the transformations with the pre-existing order.

Although I tried to define ‘Komness’ in Chapter One, it is still important to recapitulate it here for the purpose of emphasis. As I gathered from Benedicta, Anyway and other informants, ‘Komness’ connotes the ‘core culture’ of Kom. It is Kom identity – that element which the Kom people hold onto, even when they are in distant places. ‘Komness’ comprises a complex which includes language, food, traditional dress and festivals. The eight chapters of this thesis come to the following conclusions.

The relationship between technology, society and social hierarchies

This thesis emphasises that Kom identity has been and remains a work in progress, owing to geographical mobility and the ability of individuals and communities to negotiate and navigate various encounters with differences during and after colonial times. The introduction of various technologies in Kom between 1928 and 1998 such as
much improved roads, motor vehicles, and schools, inevitably brought in their train significant social, economic and cultural changes. The technologies were accepted, translated and adapted by Kom people. But in their appropriation of the various technologies, Kom also held on to their core culture, Komness.

Social hierarchies were either created or reinforced. For instance, during the road construction which was discussed in Chapter Four, the Fon and his traditional authority actively helped in supplying the labour. The road helped to accelerate the geographical mobility of the Kom people. The motor vehicles, ownership of which first occurred among the Kom in 1955, produced new social categories like drivers, motor boys, charterers and vehicle owners. The school and the church were very instrumental in the creation of various hierarchies which arose during this period in Kom. The church was responsible for the birth of new hierarchies like the catechists, mission boys, mission girls and the geographical/social mobility of people. In like manner, the school produced pupils and teachers with widened intellectual horizons. The teachers became geographically and socially very mobile. They were the letter writers and the educators in Kom societies. The overall impact of these technologies on Kom helped in its transformation.

Using primary and secondary sources, the thesis has traced the history of Kom from its colonial setting to post-independent Cameroon by following the way technologies influenced and shaped the geographical and social mobility. As new technologies of social and physical mobility; they have influenced and in turn been influenced by local people. Kom experiences and encounters with others, had informed Kom kfaang or newness, as a process of actively modernising traditions and traditionalising the influences of others on Kom society. Kom movements into Bamenda and more distant spaces showed that their local and global encounters kept enriching what they called kfaang. Their cultural identity had to be constantly negotiated and navigated. As I discussed in Chapter One, kfaang was not imposed on Kom, that the notion of kfaang came to mean not only newness but that which was translated and accepted. Kom people interpreted and appropriated it. Due to local and global encounters informed by Kom people’s geographical and social mobility that navigated and re-navigated; negotiated and re-negotiated, kfaang became firmly rooted in Kom. It is also he case that kfaang was partly introduced by the missionary and colonial administration which Kom did not only receive because it denoted progress and forward-looking perspectives, but because these technologies were relevant to their social context. Therefore, I have contended here that for kfaang to make any sense in the society it must be relevant to the people and their social milieu. There must as well be a certain degree of geographical mobility. This comes out quite clearly in the thesis. Kom people contextualised newness, domesticated some and made it relevant before they appropriated it. As we have tried to demonstrate throughout the work, the Kom people attempted to domesticate various technologies by giving them various names. Thus the road became ‘road of newness’; the vehicle became afuem-a-kfaang, ‘the carpenter bee of newness’ because of its sound, to name only a couple. This logically led to the conclusion that Kom people never completely gave up their traditional ways to dream of newness, rather the outcome was a blend of both.
Kfaang and its purveyors

Closely related to kfaang were its purveyors, innovators and entrepreneurial people in the Kom society. These are people who were the cultural conduits of kfaang. They included teachers, catechists, mission boys, mission girls and Christians who appropriated various types of kfaang. These people were models, who represented the modern Kom person as a result of the new ideas introduced to Kom. This meant that ideas travelled. Such people were partly severed from their roots in the old Kom system. They were on their way to becoming urbanites, and experienced the transition from rural to urban life. It is also evident from the work, especially from Chapters Six and Seven, that these sets of people became new social hierarchies in many ways. They were baptised with water which was called the holy water, received first Holy Communion which was the body of Christ, received confirmation, a baptism by the Holy Spirit and became ambassadors of Christ. Others married with oaths taken before a crowd to bind the couple together in riches, poverty, sickness and health till death did them part. They adopted new names like Janarius, Peter, Paul, Joseph, Mary, Susan, Mary Paula and Francis. Some became Rev. Sisters and Rev. Fathers with prefixes to their names, such as the Rev. Fr. Peter Ndong Nyangie. These local heroes and heroines had been by any stretch of imagination transformed. These were people who became kfaang themselves or were considered as such by others within the Kom society. From the story of Benedicta and other informants it seems apparent that she was regarded as an embodiment of kfaang, owing to her appropriation of technologies like the school and the church. She became very mobile. But once back in Kom, it appears that some felt she had gone too far with kfaang, resulting in a degree of estrangement from her peers. They themselves had held onto their ‘Komness’.

From this experience and other evidence from fieldwork, I concluded that no matter how deeply someone had embraced kfaang, it was important that his or her ‘Komness’ was maintained. Kfaang, no matter how it was imbibed, had its limitations. No-one, not even Benedicta, should be totally a kfaang person and in the process give up his or her ‘Komness’. In trying to come to terms in Chapter One with the role of kfaang in social transformation, we encountered Benedicta Neng Young. Sometimes naming can be taken for granted but not in this work. Although her new name for most purposes was Benedicta, her traditional Kom names had remained intact. Now she was speaking to me in Kom.

In the work we also examined the existence of Kom cultural practices outside the kingdom, taking Bamenda as a case study. Here we saw the persistence of the former mores surrounding conviviality, as at Kubou’s compound. It would seem that there is room for kfaang and room for tradition, and that they both must persist for mutual growth, tradition and kfaang.

The urge to maintain ‘Komness’ has been another theme of this work. In Chapter Two, Kom was defined as a culturally bound geographical entity which was constructed in the second half of the 19th century. Upon that historical basis it appeared that Kom cultural identity was largely based. Informants told how they had moved, domesticated and ‘Komified’ distant places, as well as themselves. They had tried to construct ‘Komness’ in faraway places with a focus on place, space and belonging. The research here was combined with ethnography and readings generally on identity. The culmination of that exercise was reached in Chapter Eight where I laboured to show the persistence of ‘Komness’ despite in some cases superficial changes.
Technologies and identity construction

It has been concluded that although these changes are numerous, especially for Kom—the coming of the church and the school, as well as modes of mobility such as the motor vehicle, and new roads—people from Kom had integrated these into their way of thinking and accepted, translated, interpreted and appropriated them in what they called *kfaang*. While on the surface it seemed that society, mentalities, and people themselves, had radically changed, a closer examination suggested that the changes were not so profound with regard to their identity, ‘Komness’.

Innovations of course have become an important part of the construction of identities, themselves, by way of differences among the technologies. Each technology introduced into Kom led to a differentiation of identity around it. For instance, it seemed to me that those who appropriated the technology of the school and the church emerged with different identities as opposed to those who had not done so. Thus, there were teachers, pupils, Christians, mission boys and girls. Thus also there was a difference in identity for women, men, young and old people. Of special interest is the role of the youth as a driving force in geographical, social, and technological mobility. In the thesis I have tried to indicate that the active population which moved out of Kom to the Coast, to the plantations, or became converted to Christianity, comprised much of the time of the younger people in Kom. The case of the church is quite relevant and must not be taken here as something unusual. Elsewhere in Africa studies have shown that those who appropriated the missions were mostly the youth. The case of Kom was no exception and echoes a large body of scholarship on the subject. I have also argued that youth participation in the church and school can be explained by the fact that they were those most alienated from the traditional and colonial restructuring of Kom. Second, youth are very swift at grasping and appropriating new technologies. A case in point is the Internet and mobile phones. These new technologies have been quickly appropriated by the youths in many ways, and comprised another mould of identity.

Closely related to the youth identity issue have been women. Women have not been given enough attention in mobility and technological studies in Africa. Benedicta’s story in the beginning of this thesis shows us that women could appropriate technology and become mobile on their own. The case of Benedicta and her school colleagues was followed by that of Juliana, discussed in Chapter Six. Her mobility led to the opening of the credit union in Kom. All these life histories trace the changes in gender roles which accompanied the introduction of technologies in Kom. Women too were a potent force in social change in this society.

Social change and continuity

The work set out to examine how much Kom had changed by the end of 1998. I began this work with the story of Benedicta who had travelled to Nso, Nigeria, London, Ngoundere, Yaoundé, Douala, Buea and Bamenda and finally Njinikom, Kom. Her story was just one of many and was complemented by that of Anyway Ndichia. While some residents of Kom underwent schooling, and engaged with the church, others migrated to areas like the Coast. Various dynamics were at work here. In numerous cases people returned home but resided in different ‘aggregates’ than the ones which
they had left behind on migrating. Some had whole-heartedly embraced *kfaang*, and might experience a degree of estrangement on return.

The life histories derived from my ethnographic fieldwork were invaluable in sketching some of the fine detail of social transformation in Kom. More generally, both the ethnographic and historical research undertaken for this study led to the argument that social transformation in Kom between 1928 and 1998 was inscribed in the social dynamics surrounding the appropriation of technologies and expressed in geographical and social mobility. But the result was not one of simple replacement. For example, the new roads accessible to motor vehicles did not wipe out footpaths that had existed there before. The decline of the Fon’s power and of his executive as occasioned by the introduction of Christianity and education by no means completely destroyed their status and authority completely. At least as at 1998, the position of the Fon of Kom remained pivotal for many residents of Kom. It was not the case that complete transformation of Kom, through the introduction of *kfaang* and the mobility of Kom people, had taken place.

But the concept of *kfaang* was important in shaping the Kom society in the way Kom people translated, interpreted and accepted it. In that social context *kfaang* was able to shape the Kom society over time and space. Since Kom people were able to integrate *kfaang* in their midst, they were also able to shape *kfaang*. Shaping *kfaang*, was carried out in the context of the domestication of newness.

**‘The Kom identity’ or just ‘Kom identity’?**

Another conclusion concerns the discourse on Kom identity. Should one refer to ‘the’ Kom identity or ‘Kom identity’ tout court? The prefix ‘the’ before the term Kom identity tends to imply an essentialist perspective on the issue. A small matter perhaps, but it seemed to point towards a larger understanding of issues of controversy among scholars of cultural identities. At the inception of the research as a novice social scientist from Kom, the use of ‘the’ Kom identity had caused me no anguish. As the work proceeded, it began to seem that the use of ‘the’ bestowed on identity an image of something frozen in time and space. Many scholars who have worked in Kom and in the Bamenda Grassfields have laboured over the issue, of identity, and their literature is replete with the term ‘the Kom identity’. My own final view, as I have contended here, is that Kom identity is an imagined reality which is constructed, contested and fluid, borne out of geographical mobility, which is the feature of all societies. ‘The’ should therefore be removed from identity studies on Kom as well as in the Bamenda Grassfields because its usage changes the meaning of cultural identity and renders it more difficult for those who are interested in cultural identity studies to understand and grasp its real meaning.

**Dynamism of Kom identity**

In like manner, the work has also contended that Kom identity is dynamic and can travel: going to places it accompanies people, or people move with it. The work has shown that Kom identity has indeed gone places, since many Kom people migrated to Bamenda, Buea, and other diasporic places. Bamenda itself was taken as the case study combined with observations in Holland, Belgium and Germany. Observations in these areas suggested strongly that although places and mentalities interact with other cultures, identity is by no means effaced. The case study showed that Kom people work
very hard to maintain what they consider to be their cultural identity. They keep up their cultural dance – *njang* – they eat their traditional staple diets, and their Fon constantly visits them to confer distinction on Kom notables.

Chapter Eight examined the place of identity and discussed the construction of Kom identity among Kom people in the diaspora. As people moved into diasporic places, it becomes incumbent on them to feel at home. That home of course was really Kom. The Fon’s visits to Bamenda were intended in part to urge Kom people there to ‘Komify’ their new domicile. That he tried to achieve by installing a ‘Fon’ there. The ‘Fon’ in Bamenda was further empowered also to confer honour on other important personalities in Bamenda palace. Beyond Bamenda, the Kom people in other areas like Buea, Tiko, Victoria, Kumba and Mamfe, although not really constituting a cohesive group as in Bamenda, now and then returned to Kom. Here they no doubt felt that they were renewing their ‘Komness’. It seemed that at times they were viewed with amusement and perhaps disdain by their kinsmen.

The confluence between history and anthropology

By working on this study it was brought home to the researcher that, as others before him had realised, the confluence between history and social anthropology could be very useful to both historians and social scientists. What had been uppermost in the mind of this researcher had been the aim of writing an informed history of Kom, via several lines of investigation. The technique of participant observation, so central to anthropology as a discipline, resulted in interviews conducted in kitchens, coffee farms and beer parlours. The accepted methodology of the historian took me to various archives around the world – PRO, Mission 21, Buea, Bamenda and Njinikom. Returning to first-hand observation while in Europe, I constantly attended meetings of Kom in Belgium, Germany and Holland. All these reflected the desire to pursue a rigorous ethnography.

Among Kom people there is a saying that ‘one hand cannot tie a bundle’. In the case of the present study, that saying can be taken to imply that two people can do with ease what one person will not be able to do satisfactorily. Employing the methodology of one discipline without utilising that of the other would only have narrowed the work and its potential contribution to scholarship. The ethnographic element added through life histories and first-hand observation of change in Kom, helped to enrich the conclusions at which the study has arrived. As others had realised before my own research journey, a combination of history and anthropology was indispensable when studying the kind of topic of concern here. The intersection of these two disciplines led me to results which could not have been obtained in any other way.

The intended contribution of this work

First, the thesis challenges social scientific and historical scholarship that reduces cultural identity to purely essentialist terms. This work contributes to the debate over the nature of cultural identity among the Kom. It concludes that ‘Kom identity’ is an imagined reality that has been produced socially and politically over time and space.

Second, it has attempted to contribute towards the understanding and usage of an emic approach regarding the concept of modernity. This contested concept can degenerate into an empty catchword among social scientists unless closely interrogated. For
Kom people, ‘modernity’ came to entail a cross-cultural conviviality which created spaces for global and local encounters to survive. *Kfaang* therefore was not imposed on Kom; Kom accepted some of it and blended it with their values. The hybrid was neither something totally modern or totally traditional. Thus this study is another contribution to the historiography of the Bamenda Grassfields and another way of viewing and understanding modernity, while also attempting to contribute towards writing an emic history of the voiceless.

Third, the study is one of the first on the people of the Bamenda Grassfields which explicitly treats mobility, communication technology and social hierarchies. Of course this does not mean that nothing at all has been undertaken in this regard.

The thesis has tried to contribute towards the writing of social history. Most of the informants constitute those who fall in the lower rungs of the society. They have been generally called the voiceless people. Simply put, it refers to those sets of people who have contributed towards the production of history but who have not received a commensurate reward in historical research and writings. This branch of history has not taken serious root in Cameroon historiography. Most of the informants cited in this volume were people who had never been educated in the western sense and some were contacted in their smoke-filled kitchens or on their coffee farms. In addition, an attempt has been made to trace family histories of these informants.

Finally, the outcome of this work is a blend of social anthropology and ethnography. This reflects my fervent belief that a combination of these disciplines can contribute much to the elucidating of the complexities of social processes in Kom, Cameroon, Africa and elsewhere in the world. Therefore, the study has concluded that the two subjects might draw strength from each other to their mutual advantage.

This study has been an attempted prolegomenon, a preliminary observation and description, and an invitation to a longer journey towards a social history. My wish is that its substantive objectives be checked and expanded. Mobility, both geographical and social, technologies and social hierarchies, the phenomenon of identity in itself, require much more close scrutiny and a comparative approach undertaken by other budding scholars in the Bamenda Grassfields, Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa. As a matter of fact, a comparative study of the role of mobility, technologies and social change in its own right promises to address fundamental issues in a historical-anthropological dimension in other parts of Africa. Further comparative studies appear quite necessary in order that it might be possible to integrate the findings on wider issues of social change. Another such study might echo the finding that migrants continue to practice their culture in diasporic places in the same way. This thesis has already started that journey by describing the interwoven nature of *kfaang*, Kom geographical mobility and social hierarchies, but also of the changes in the thinking and the impact of mobility, both geographical and social, on Kom people.

It is hoped that this study has provided some insights and guidelines to facilitate further interchanges in the future study of social change in Cameroon, Africa and Europe. Whatever way we study it and whatever tools we use, the fundamental and crucial issue in any human society is that change is the only permanent thing.