Summary

In 1928 St. Anthony’s Primary School, Njinikom, Kom, North-West Cameroon was opened. This school can be regarded as a technology of social change; the new churches and schools formed a total package that introduced people to new ideas, new clothes, new eating habits, new media, new building styles, etc. Also in terms of mobility many things changed. Between 1928 and 1998 – when the road between Kom and Bamenda was tarred – the number of people travelling to and from Kom steadily increased, and the distances covered became ever greater. The people involved in this physical and social mobility distinguished themselves ever more as people of ‘newness’.

This research is a historical-anthropological description of the cumulative impact of horizontal and vertical mobility in the twentieth century on Kom people and their society in North-West Cameroon. The central concept in this thesis is kfaang, ‘newness’, in its relation to ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and mobility. To Kom people, kfaang connotes newness – innovation and novelty in thinking and doing – and the material indicators and relationships that result from this. Kfaang may be internally generated, but it is almost invariably externally induced. In many ways, it translates as but is not limited to ‘modernity’ and ‘modernization’ in the Western sense, as things of local origin may 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 may come from within or without, or be something simply internally generated that is not the usual way of seeing and doing. Kom people accepted and appropriated kfaang only when it was relevant in their needs. Depending upon the circumstances kfaang denotes a process and a product. In both cases this involved change mediated by mobility and by implication the technologies which facilitated spatial and social mobility. Kfaang means ‘newness’, but not in the sense of imposed or forced change: Kfaang is locally appropriated and accepted.

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. Various archives were consulted both in Cameroon and Europe. In Cameroon this included the National Archives in Buea, the Provincial Archives in Bamenda, and various missionary and individual archives. Despite their shortcomings, these archives contained a wealth of relevant files. Furthermore unstructured interviews with various interlocutors were conducted. These informants provided most of the source material for the writing of this thesis.

Chapter Three situates Kom in the global communication ecology. In order to understand local processes it is important to situate them in a global setting. In the chapter it is argued that Kom formed an integral part of the context of global connections and interconnections, and that these connections existed long before the colonial period had started. 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 in the colonial context. Kom came into contact with distant places and cultures. This chapter examines how Kom identity as a geographical entity was constructed. Trade appeared to be the most important factor which took people to distant places. Through trade a new class of people emerged known as ‘the merchants’. This group of people acquired wealth in the form of dependents and descendents, and constructed new houses of stones and zinc.

Most importantly, these merchants were responsible for the introduction of many new things in Kom. For example, the trader-Thaddeus Kuma Nanain introduced coffee; a crop that become widespread and widely accepted in the region. The merchants’ apprentices, called ‘boy boy’, became a new category in the local social hierarchy. After serving a trader for a number of years a ‘boy boy’ might amass enough wealth and start trading on his own.

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. The chapter discusses how the construction of the road in Kom was accepted, interpreted and evaluated by Kom people. People enthusiastically participated in the road construction, accepting this part of kfaang as valuable. The local political leader - the Fon – gave his permission to the road construction, indicative of his role in kfaang. After the first stage of a motorable road between Kom and Bamenda was completed in 1954, Vincent Nsah Ndai was the first Kom man to buy a vehicle.

In connection with questions raised in Chapter Four, Chapter Five examines this first motor vehicle (afu,em a kfaang). The chapter describes how Vincent Nsah Ndai and his family became the owners of a motorised vehicle. Mobility, land and money to hire employees all played a role. The chapter also deals with the questions: How was the car as technology ‘domesticated’ in Kom? How did the introduction of the car influence the emergence of new social hierarchies? The chapter argues that a ‘regime’ was developed around the vehicle: various people would call themselves the owner of the vehicle and a new social class controlling mobility emerged, including drivers and mechanics.

The motor vehicle is a tangible technology, churches and schools are not nearly as tangible. Chapters Six and Seven deal with the school and the church as technologies which led to the construction of 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 of change: How did the church as an institution influence the geographical and social mobility of the people involved in it? The position of the Fon who negotiated the coming of the church to Kom also forms part of the chapter.

Chapter Seven discusses another form of technology, namely the school (ndo ngwali kfaang). It examines how some Kom people were able to appropriate that technology and, for example, how newly formed teachers 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 while he himself never went to school. The chapter further interprets the role of some of the first women who went to school and later became teachers.

Unlike Chapters Four to Seven in which technology is central to the discussion of mobility, Chapter Eight examines kfaang as a concept. It examines what ‘newness’ meant to Kom people and also how Kom people adapted to the challenges of new tools and new ideas. The chapter is organised around the relationship between ‘newness’ and mobility; 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. The central argument in this chapter is that Kom people in their geographical mobility attempted to recreate Kom in diasporic spaces. In this connection, the ideas of culture, identity and belonging are helpful. 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 shows how technology and mobility interact in 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 dealt with all along.

The research has led to the following conclusions:
This study has illustrated that Kom identity constitutes work in progress, thanks 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 like the road, the motor car, and the school shows that various changes came with such technologies. The technologies were accepted and translated in the history of Kom-culture. Komness can be interpreted as an interrelation between a historical core-culture and social change in the meaning of kfaang. The introduction of new technologies and new forms of mobility lead to the invention of new social hierarchies.

Using oral and written, primary and secondary sources, the thesis has traced the history of Kom from its colonial settings to post independent Cameroon following the way technologies shaped geographical and social mobility. This was analysed as a process of dual shaping. This interaction is considered in relation to kfaang: ‘newness’. Experiences of Kom and encounters with others show kfaang as a process of modernising traditions and traditionalising the influences of others on Kom society.

In Kom the application of kfaang was not only to refer to progress and to direct to the future, but also as being relevant in the given social context. An important conclusion is that kfaang is always situated in context and should be understood in its functionality and processes of appropriation.

One way in which people of Kom tried to domesticate technologies was by giving them new names. An example of this is the ‘road’ that became ndzi kfaang, the ‘road of newness’. This leads to the conclusion that Kom people never gave up their traditional ways or expectation of ‘newness’ but that it always was of a mix of both.

Closely related to kfaang were its purveyors, innovators and entrepreneurial people in Kom society. These are people who were like the cultural conduits of kfaang. They were the teachers, catechists, mission boys, mission girls and Christians, who appropriated various types of kfaang. These people were models, who represent the modern Kom person who introduced new ideas and things which into Kom. New names, new rituals, new knowledge became part of their life world and they formed as well the linkage between the rural and urban. They became kfaang themselves or were considered as such by others within Kom society. But there was as well critique on these new mobile
people who went too far in *kfaang* and became ‘*kfaang* in superlative’. In that case they were looked upon by their peers with disdain and further estrangement. Yet that was just on the surface as they held onto their “komness”. Thus, it can be concluded that *kfaang* no matter how it was imbibed, had limitations for individual’s appropriations. One could not be totally a *kfaang* person neither could one give up his or her ‘komness’. Thus, there is room for *kfaang* and room for tradition and that relate in mutual growth and understanding of tradition and *kfaang*.

The urge to maintain ‘komness’ has been another conclusion of the work. In chapter two Kom was defined as a culturally bound geographical entity which was constructed in the second half of the 19th century. That essentialist notion of Kom cultural identity was understood through the stories of informants and how they have moved, domesticated and ‘Komified’ distant places. They tried to construct ‘Komness’ in faraway places with focus on place, space and belonging.

In chapter eight ‘Komness’ was explained despite the changes at the surface. These changes were numerous; the introduction of church, school, ICTs and roads. These changes however have been integrated and appropriated in what is labelled *kfaang*. On the surface it seems that society has changed, that mentalities have changed but in the end the analysis shows that the changes have not been that big in relation to Komness, identity.

Technologies have become an important part of the construction of identity of Kom. For instance, those who appropriated the school and the church too emerged with different identities as opposed to those who had not or differently appropriated these technologies. Thus, there was a difference in identities for women, men, young and old people. Of special interest is the role of youths as a driving force in geographical, social mobility and technologies. The active population which moved out of Kom to the Coast, plantations or became converted to Christianity were the youths. The youth participation in the Church and school can be explained by the fact that they were alienated from the traditional and colonial restructuring of Kom. Secondly, youths are very good 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. They therefore, created one mould of identity.

Closely related to the youth identity have been women. Women have not been given serious attention in mobility and technological studies in Africa. Women appropriated technology and became mobile on their own. The life histories presented in this thesis show women as agents of social change. Thus they could acquire new knowledge, new ideas and change their social roles. The life histories of various women have shown that back in Kom they were living in different ‘aggregates’ different from how they left. Their mobility ended in Kom. Some had embraced *kfaang* in its superlative and back in Kom they were further estranged. Nevertheless they also embraced Komness.

The social transformation of Kom between 1928 and 1998 was inscribed in social dynamics around the appropriation of technologies and expressed in geographical and social mobility. For instance, motor roads which were widened and tarred did not wipe out footpaths that had existed there before the motor roads. The waning away of the Fon’s (king’s) power as occasioned by Christianity and education which caused considerable rupture in the Fondom did not completely do away with the power of the Fon. At least as at 1998, the position of the Fon of Kom remained strong. With all these this research concluded that complete transformation of Kom through the introduction of *kfaang* and the mobility of Kom people has not been very deep. *Kfaang* has been im-
portant in shaping Kom society in the way Kom people translated, interpreted and accepted it. In that social context *kfaang* was able to shape 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 done in the contextualisation and domestication of newness. There is always something old in something new no matter how radically the thing has been changed.

Kom identity is dynamic and constructed. That is why this thesis proposes to eradicate the use of ‘the’ in the study of Kom identity. The prefix “the” before Kom cultural identity gave strength to essentialist perspective even stronger, contrary to the evidence shown in the work. The use of “the” gives identity the image that it is frozen in time and space. Most scholars who worked in Kom and Bamenda Grasslands on identities have over-laboured “the” and their literature is replete with that word. 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, as it appears to clear all the doubts about making cultural identities to remain fixed and frozen.

Kom identity is dynamic and can travel: going to places, thus spread out, but not on its own, it goes with the people or people move with it. The research has shown that Kom identity has gone places and that during this mobility in the interaction between cultures identity is formed. The life histories and case studies show that Kom people worked very hard to maintain their identity through the practicing of their cultural dance – *njang*, eating their traditional staple diets and their Fon constantly visiting to knight his people. This process of ‘komification’ is also very present when we consider the migrants who return regularly to Kom.

Methodologically the point of this research was that the confluence between history and social anthropology could be very useful to both historians and social scientists. Interviews were conducted in kitchens, coffee farms, beer parlours and participant observation technique took me to cultural events and village life, both in Cameroon and in Holland, Belgium, Germany where cultural meetings of the Kom diaspora were held. The quest for history also needed the rich resources from various archives around the world-PRO, Mission 21, Buea, Bamenda and Njinikom. All these reflected deep and rigorous ethnography.

The study has contributed towards the understanding and usage of an emic concept of what goes near to modernity. To Kom people *kfaang* was borne out of 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 nor totally traditional. This is another contribution to the historiography of the Bamenda Grasslands and another way of viewing and understanding modernity.

This work has contributed towards writing an emic history of the voiceless; a typology of history that has not taken roots in Cameroon history so far. Most of the informants were people who had never been educated in the western sense and some were contacted in their smoked filled kitchens and on their coffee farms. In addition, an attempt has been made to trace family histories of these informants and to link these individual cases to a more collective history.

This study forms an invitation to a longer journey towards a social history of Kom. Furthermore, a comparative study of the role of mobility, technologies and social change promises to address fundamental issues in a historic-anthropological dimension.
in other parts of Africa. For instance, do other cases have the same characteristics and role of mobility and ICTs in societal transformation? It might echo that migrants continue to practice their culture in diasporic places in the same way. This thesis has already started that journey by describing the interweaving nature between *kfaang*, Kom geographical mobility and social hierarchies. 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.