



**Intimacies and distances: Mobility, belonging and the use  
of information and communication technologies by young  
Cameroonians in Cape Town**

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A dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award  
of the degree of Master of Social Science

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2014

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the young Cameroonians who gave so generously of their time and energy to help me with my work. I wish you all the best as you step into your future.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Professor Francis Nyamnjoh for his advice and patience throughout the process of researching and writing this dissertation. Thanks to my mother, Liz, for her unwavering positivity, encouragement and emotional and practical support. Also to Dr Richard Harding for additional advice and encouragement. Thanks to my fellow students for solidarity throughout, especially Noizee, Paula, and Nikiwe. A special thank-you to Alicia Ernstzen for helping me to navigate logistics and administration at the University of Cape Town while I was on the wrong side of the world.

# **INTIMACIES AND DISTANCES: MOBILITY, BELONGING AND ICT USE BY CAMEROONIAN STUDENTS IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA**

## **Abstract**

Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are making it increasingly easy to build and maintain social links across distance, by effecting a compression of space and time, and allowing friends and family members to remain in ever-closer contact, even though they may live geographically far apart. These distanced relationships facilitated by ICT represent an important site of anthropological inquiry, even as they present methodological challenges to the accepted conceptions of fieldwork and the field.

In this thesis I present the results of an ethnography of the use of ICT by Cameroonian students living in Cape Town, South Africa between June 2011 and June 2013.

The research question guiding my work reads as follows: “Do (and if so, how do) Cameroonian students in Cape Town transcend geographical and social boundaries through their use of information and communication technology?”

I argue that the Cameroonian students who I met during my fieldwork in Cape Town used ICTs to build and maintain relationships within their community (or multiple communities), and to draw upon their social networks to (re)negotiate and transcend geographical and social boundaries. I also argue that while they do this they simultaneously contest and reinforce hierarchies of various forms, be they politico-geographical, social or economic. In the course of my fieldwork, it became increasingly evident that the young people who helped me in my inquiries used these technologies to intimately entangle, as well as distance, themselves from others in their communicative environment and relationships. I draw on my fieldwork to illustrate the ways in which they do this.

I argue that these people negotiated relationships of marginality, belonging, obligation and responsibility through the ways in which they used ICTs, and that they drew on the functions of ICTs, particularly the social networking site, Facebook, to actively construct their identities.

I conducted the main body of my fieldwork between June 2011, and June 2012. However, at the time of submitting the draft of my thesis in July 2013, I was still in contact with the people who helped me in my research, and therefore was engaged in fieldwork throughout the course of the research and writing process.

This study forms part of a larger project entitled: “Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), mobility and the reconfiguration of marginality in South(ern) Africa”. I hope to contribute to this larger project with this ethnographic study of the use of ICTs by Cameroonian students in Cape Town in the context of their mobility, varying levels of

marginality, and their social networks and community relations, by seeking to answer the research question.

## Contents

Intimacies and distances: Mobility, belonging and ICT use by Cameroonian students in Cape Town, South Africa .....	i
Abstract .....	4
Chapter One .....	8
Nimbleness and immobility: Mobility, ICT and forced inertia .....	8
Introduction .....	8
Moving to South Africa from Cameroon .....	9
Research question .....	10
Flows and closures .....	11
Hostility and conviviality .....	13
Bushfalling: In search of success .....	14
Leaving home .....	15
Cameroonian frontierspeople in Cape Town .....	16
Cameroon-South African Communication ecology .....	17
Plan of discussion chapters .....	18
Conclusion .....	18
Chapter two .....	20
The journey through the research .....	20
Introduction .....	20
Arriving at the topic .....	20
My companions on the journey .....	21
Discovering the field .....	23
Methods used: Fieldwork in an unconventional field .....	24
A visit to Buea, Cameroon .....	26
Challenges, mistakes and mishaps .....	27
Me and my research .....	28
Inside and outside .....	30
Familiarity of Space - Degrees of 'going native' .....	31
Ethical Considerations .....	32
Conclusion .....	33
Chapter 3: Social Capital, Networks and Habitus in the networks of Cameroonian students in Cape Town .....	35
Introduction .....	35
Power, privilege and hierarchies in an interconnected world .....	35
Tactics of empowerment- Social capital .....	37

Global Hierarchies .....	40
Becoming a source of social capital.....	43
Social support, Networks of caring.....	44
Reaching out .....	46
Conclusion: .....	47
Chapter 4: Gifting, reciprocity and obligation in communication by young Cameroonians in Cape Town. ....	49
Introduction.....	49
Bushfalling, obligations and young Cameroonians' communication relationships .....	49
Reaching out .....	51
Giving the gift of communication.....	52
The moral framework of communication, remittances and gifting .....	52
The value of communication.....	53
The negative value of 'unwanted' communications .....	54
Communication acts as gifts .....	55
The breakdown in reciprocity .....	56
Embodiment of responsibility.....	57
Conclusion .....	58
Chapter 5- Facebook and the visual construction of identity by Cameroonian students in Cape Town .....	59
Introduction.....	59
Introducing Facebook .....	59
The thing and its double: Visual representation in anthropology .....	61
Facebook as space and practice .....	62
Building oneself on Facebook: The cases of Mokolo and Paul.....	63
Mokolo: Images of success .....	65
Paul: Representing worldliness.....	67
Conclusion .....	68
Conclusion: ICT and communicating success .....	69
Main research findings.....	69
Contribution to current knowledge on mobility and ICT .....	70
References.....	73

## Chapter One

### Nimbleness and immobility: Mobility, ICT and forced inertia

#### Introduction

##### *Box 1.1*

I sat in the dim light of the flat in Maitland, a suburb of Cape Town near the industrial area, less affluent than the leafy green suburbs of Claremont and Constantia on the slopes of Table Mountain, but occupied by people with greater economic means than those who lived in the neighbourhoods of Khayalitsha in the apartheid-created townships or Lavender Hill on the Cape Flats. I was waiting for Mokolo, one of the students who helped me with my research, to finish getting dressed so that we could leave for a nearby internet café to observe what was going on there. The smell of spices and fish fried in oil hung in the air, the ghostly remnants of a meal from dinner time wafting into my consciousness. The smell carried the connotations of a more distant past, as well as a more distant place. My attention snapped back to the present. Two people occupied the room with me, but no one made conversation. I perched awkwardly on the arm of an old sofa, observing Rose and Mata staring at the tiny screens of their respective cell phones, their faces illuminated by private shafts of light as each connected with her own private world, ignoring me and mine. They were using *Blackberrys*, an expensive make of cell phone, one that carried prestige and bestowed heightened social status upon the lucky user. My gaze flickered to a glass jar containing the empty shells of less desired cell phones, cast aside to languish amongst broken pens and last year's Christmas decorations, no longer valued by those who used to cherish them.

I continued to scrutinize my companions, the only sound a slight tapping of thumbs on keypads, accompanied by the occasional chuckle or sharp intake of breath as the contents of their hand-held screens amused or displeased them. I wondered how this technology that has been so lauded for “connecting people”, allowing them to “say hello” has resulted in this blatant disconnection of people from others with whom they share the same physical space.

Then Rose looked up and held her phone over to Mata, sharing her private moment with her friend and challenging my hastily-formed assumptions. Mokolo entered the room, brightly attired in a tracksuit bearing the green, red and yellow colours of the Cameroonian national flag, and we went off to buy some airtime.

The focus of my research is the way in which Cameroonian students, living in Cape Town between 2011 and 2013, used information and communication technology. (ICT). I examined the ways in which these young people drew on ICT to build and maintain social networks and connections, to construct their identity and to negotiate, stretch, avoid and solidify ties of belonging within and beyond South Africa. Although research has previously been published which investigates Cameroonian migration (de Bruijn, 2009; Fleischer, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2005; 2011; Pelican, 2008); and the use of communication technology in Cameroon (Tzanu,

2012) or by Cameroonian students abroad (Fleischer 2007), the current study contributes a South African case study on the on-going attempts to document mobility and communication in Africa by Africans and Cameroonians in particular.

In the chapters that follow, I present an account of the use of ICT by Cameroonian students in Cape Town from 2011 to 2013, drawing on ethnographic examples to show the ways in which these students relate to the communication technologies which they use, and how this, in some cases, allows them to contest the boundaries imposed on them by global political geography, social context and economics.

I situate this ethnography within its context, orienting the reader to the social, political and economic situations in Cameroon that provide the impetus to move, the practice of leaving Cameroon by Cameroonians, and particularly the movement of Cameroonians to South Africa. I will then discuss the use of ICT in everyday life, and particularly within a transnational context, asking whether the use of these technologies allows for a subversion of hierarchical borders and boundaries, and if by using these technologies, people re-inscribe existing boundaries and create hierarchies of their own, as well as describing other possibilities.

### **Moving to South Africa from Cameroon**

Cameroon was one of the top eight African countries in terms of receipt of temporary residence permits (including study permits) from the South African Department of Home Affairs, with Cameroonian nationals being granted 2.9% of the temporary residence permits in 2012 (Statistics South Africa, 2013). Of the Cameroonian nationals who were issued with temporary residence permits, a relatively high proportion (32.3%) of these received permits to study in South Africa<sup>1</sup>. The young people who were instrumental in the constructing of this research came from this group.

De Bruijn argues that, for Cameroonians, “distanced relations are part of a society and economy where migration is part of the lifecycle” (De Bruijn, 2009: 176). I argue that, despite the geographic distance between the people involved in these relationships, those I studied appropriated information and communication technology to forge and maintain deep intimacies, to draw on social support and social capital, and also to construct their own identities while living transnational lives.

However, I follow Primus Tazanu in acknowledging that, while in many cases ICT does allow for maintaining and strengthening of relationships, interactions mediated by ICT take place within unique social contexts. Therefore it is implausible to assert unequivocally that ICT brings interconnectedness. Rather, it is important to take into account the “inequalities or cultural intricacies” (Tazanu, 2012: 262) that influence the different ways in which relationships are enacted and embodied between people using ICT.

Tazanu investigates transnational sociality from the perspective of non-migrant Cameroonians maintaining relationships (with varying degrees of success or harmony) with Cameroonians living abroad. His investigation centres on the practice of remittances and the social discord engendered by unfulfilled expectations of contact and contributions by migrant

towards non-migrant Cameroonians. In chapter four of this thesis I draw on this argument as I investigate gifting, reciprocity and obligation between Cameroonian students in Cape Town and their friends and family at home and in other countries.

Studies on the impact of technology on daily life have been conducted in America, Europe and Africa. Boyd (2007) examines the participation of American teenagers in social networking sites such as MySpace.com, and argues that this participation is key to teenage sociality in the United States. Miller and Slater (2000) explore how an ethnographic approach to Trinidadian identity can contribute to knowledge about the internet, while use of the internet is becoming integral to Trinidadian identity. Lamoureaux (2011) explores the ways in which students in Sudan use cell phones, focussing on the poetics of text messaging; Powell (2012) examines the use of cell phones in Cape Town, South Africa, both by examining her own experience of owning and using this technology and an ethnography of the use of cell phones in Langa, Cape Town. Tazanu (2012) argues that, although ICTs are used to maintain ties in transnational relationships, the expectation that migrants should be constantly “available and reachable” (Tazanu, 2012, xix) contributes to disharmony in these relationships. These authors have interrogated the relationship between people and technology, as well as the ways in which people use certain technologies to conduct, maintain, enhance (and sometimes sever and restrict) their interpersonal relationships. I hope to contribute to this growing body of knowledge, adding the case study of young Cameroonians living in Cape Town and using ICTs.

### **Research question**

In the first formulation of my research question I asked:

*How do Cameroonian students in Cape Town transcend geographical and social boundaries through their social networks and community relations, as facilitated by the capabilities provided by ICTs?*

Productive debate with my fellow students and, in particular, with participants and lecturers at a writing workshop for the project: *Mobile Africa Revisited* in Buea, Cameroon in January 2012, exposed two crucial oversights in the formulation of this question. Firstly, in asking: “How do Cameroonian students transcend these boundaries?” I had already assumed that they do this before conducting any fieldwork to investigate whether or not this is the case. I reworked my original question to ask whether or not the students transcend these boundaries at all, before going on to ask how this is achieved. The second glaring assumption is contained in the last part of the question: “...as facilitated by ICTs?” The way that this is worded assumes that the “ICTs” together make up a reified object, one that has agency and is capable of action in that it “facilitates” social networking and community relations. However, I follow Powell (2012:108) in viewing ICTs as tools that might seem to influence people, but that can only do so once they have been vested with power by those who use the various technologies.

Once I had addressed these two major criticisms, my research question read as follows: “Do (and if so, how do) Cameroonian students in Cape Town transcend geographical and social

boundaries through their use of information and communication technology?” As I conducted my research, it became clear that “social networks and community relations” made up a large part of the answer to my research question, rather than being part of the question itself.

In this thesis I argue that the Cameroonian students that I met during my fieldwork in Cape Town used information and communication technology to build, and maintain relationships within their community (or multiple communities), and to draw upon their social networks to (re)negotiate and transcend geographical and social boundaries. I also argue that while they do this they simultaneously contest and reinforce hierarchies of various forms, be they politico-geographical, social, or economic. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, the way the young people who helped me in my inquiries used these technologies to intimately entangle, as well as distance, themselves from others in their communicative environment and relationships became increasingly evident. In the chapters that follow, I draw on my fieldwork to illustrate the ways in which they do this.

### **Flows and closures**

At the start of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world is witness to greater levels of flows in the movement of people, goods and finances (although at the same time these flows necessitate closures) (Appadurai, 1990), and the development and uptake of ICT is credited with facilitating certain aspects of these flows. Although people have been migrating for millennia, there is, if not an increase in the levels and ease of movement, certainly more of a focus on this phenomenon. Also, new information and communication technologies allow people to be present even when they are absent, and to allow the constant maintaining of close relationships, even over great distances. Therefore it is important that we study the ways in which mobile people use technology to enact these relationships.

According to Castells: “Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies,” noting the significance of the availability of information and communication technologies in facilitating this networking. He acknowledged that societies have always been networked (just as people have always been mobile), but he recognised the function of ICT within that networking, noting that it is not the critical role of knowledge and information that is characteristic of the network society, but rather that it is the new means through which to disseminate information and the opportunity for the exponential production of knowledge and information in a “self-expanding, virtuous cycle” (2000: 10). Castells noted that technology is a “material tool”, to be used for meaning-making through relationships of production and consumption to produce social structure (Castells, 2000: 9).

Cameroonians in Cape Town are part of overlapping mobile networks of people and things, mingling and interacting to produce social life, relationships and an effect on each other as they move about the world. Latour attributed agency to each node in these networks, including inanimate objects, such as cell phones (Latour, 1991, quoted in Warnier, 2012). Powell (2012) shows the ways in which people can be affected by these technologies, and yet how they can impose their will upon them at the same time. I follow Warnier (2012) in accepting that, although people have their lives, thoughts and emotions influenced by the workings (or otherwise) of the technology that they use, it is not the technology itself that has

agency, but rather people's own frustrated expectations which are reflected through the technology.

Clifford Geertz stated that: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (1973: 5) This classic observation is exemplified in the webs of significance within which people today are suspended, and lately available in visual and data format through the records of the technologies that we use to build and sustain these webs. In this thesis I explore how people build these webs and how they may draw on them for their own advantage, or spend their time trying to extricate themselves from overly restrictive webs of connection.

While analysing these networks, flows and openings, it is essential to be aware of the closures that exist alongside and within them (Appadurai, 2000). This closure was experienced by the young Cameroonians I worked with, as they interacted with and were affected by the South African state and, particularly the Department of Home Affairs, to which they had to apply to be allowed to reside and study in South Africa.

Gupta and Ferguson draw attention to the fact that, “space becomes a kind of neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization are inscribed (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992: 7). This, they argue, allows the world to be split into falsely disjunctive, hierarchically organized spaces, and inequality to be perpetuated and reproduced. The way in which world hierarchical spaces of inequality are mapped onto the political geography of the world, is reflected within the prices set by “doki-men” or “migration brokers” (Alpes, 2011: 76) for their services in facilitating passage out of Cameroon and into various different countries. In this case, the desirability of the country is reflected in the costliness of passage.

Within these hierarchical structures that fix the world’s political geography, “passports, identity cards and visas are means that seek to fix modes of belonging and simultaneously control mobility” (Alpes, 2011: 22). However, Castells points towards the significance of the networks that people create and draw upon, arguing that “people can set up their own conditions of relating and bypass the controls that existed previously” (Castells, 2009), although not always in the ways that they might want. In this thesis I ask whether and to what extent the use of ICT allows for certain subversions of the hierarchical structures that govern mobility and belonging, and whether it facilitates more flexible modes of being in the world.

Even as the young Cameroonians I worked with were able to take part in the global flows of information through the technologies that they used, they were subject to certain closures, the most obvious of which was the obstructive immigration legislation put in place by states in general, and the South African state in particular.

Peberdy (2009) analysed the policies and practices surrounding immigration into South Africa between the years 1910 and 2008. She presents a concise history of South African immigration policies and contextualizes these within national and global politics and the nation-building projects undertaken by the South African state in its various guises throughout this period in history. She points to a correlation and coincidence between immigration policies and South African state discourse on national identity and immigrants, as well as with the nation-building project they engaged in at any particular time. However,

she reports a break in this covariance when it comes to an analysis of the national discourse and the immigration policies of the post-1994 South African state. While national discourses centre around “inclusivity, human rights, and ties to the rest of Africa” (p178), the immigration policies of this state seem to contradict these publicly stated values and national vision, as they are reported to be working to keep immigrants out, rather than welcoming them as fellow human beings and Africans.

Therefore even if we accept that communication technologies such as cell phones and the internet may be used by people to challenge and renegotiate spatial boundaries, we must remain aware of the increasingly rigid structures that discipline the movement of people in the world between 2011 and 2013. Situating the personal and interpersonal experiences of the Cameroonian students, with whom I studied in Cape Town, within the structures that discipline transnational migration and immigration helped me to understand how these structures, that may restrict or enable their mobility, facilitate and produce different ways of using ICT.

### **Hostility and conviviality**

As well as the political factors that disciplined the movement of the young Cameroonians, certain social structuring factors influenced their lives in Cape Town. Many of them had ties to the university town of Buea, the capital of the coastal South West Region of Cameroon. Some of them had been born in that area, while many had family that still lived in Buea or the nearby seaside town of Limbe. I was fortunate to visit Buea and Limbe in January 2012, within the framework of a writing workshop organised by the Mobile Africa Revisited project coordinated by the African Studies Centre in Leiden, with researchers from Senegal, Mali, Chad, Cameroon, South Africa and the Netherlands.

Buea is situated in the South Western region, part of the Anglophone region of Cameroon, an area with a history of political marginalization by the incumbent Francophone-dominated government. Konings and Nyamnjoh have documented the perceptions of marginalization by the people of the Anglophone region and the resultant birth of political organizations and pressure groups aimed at bringing Cameroonian and international attention to “the Anglophone problem” (Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997: 207). Walter Nkwi builds on the argument put forward by Konings and Nyamnjoh to further augment our understanding of the currents of marginalization, politics and social life in the South Western province of Cameroon. Nkwi elaborates on the tensions between the autochtones of the South Western province and those from the North Western grassfields region, who have migrated to the coastal regions to take part in the plantation economy and other opportunities (Nkwi, 2006).

The coastal regions of Cameroon have a history of migration and mobility of people, as residents of the North Western grassfields region would travel to the coast to seek work on the plantations. The influx of these ‘outsiders’ caused difficulties for the existing residents, who compared the new arrivals to an annoying skin rash that came, stayed and did not ever leave (Cam-no-go) (Nyamnjoh, 2009: 53), an attitude reflected in the xenophobia demonstrated by some South Africans towards foreigners from other African countries (Landau, 2011).

Young Cameroonians travel to South Africa in search of opportunities for further education or work (Pelican et al., 2008). However, this conception is often proven to be misguided, as South Africa is not able to live up to its expansive Constitutional provision for its own citizens. This leaves African visitors to the country not only deprived of basic material goods and social services, but also the victims of xenophobia. Despite these attitudes held by some South Africans, migrants into the country are not always treated with hostility, and indeed are often greeted with conviviality, as demonstrated by Sydelle Willow Smith in her photographic project: *Making Neighbourhood* (Smith, 2013). However the fact that it was necessary to undertake this project in order to “document the other side of the coin to xenophobia,” (Smith, interviewed by SA Creative Network, 2013) presupposes the existence of such attitudes and their impact on the lives of foreigners.

Structural inequalities and social injustices have resulted in the majority of poor people in South Africa looking for a scapegoat for their inability to move up the social ladder and to achieve an acceptable standard of living (Sichone, 2008).

In May 2008, anti-immigrant sentiments in South Africa culminated in a wave of xenophobic violence (Landau, 2011). Although the South African state was quick to send in the army in a display of denunciation of this aggression towards foreigners (Landau, 2011), it has been argued that these sentiments are reproduced at a higher level and in more subtle ways through immigration policies that can be said to be as hostile, albeit more subtle and insidious, as these outright attacks (Landau, 2011, Peberdy, 2009, Sharp, 2008).

### **Bushfalling: In search of success**

Despite the fact that they may face persecution in their destination of choice, many people leave their homes in search of better circumstances, or so that they can afford a better life back home for themselves and their dependants (Alpes, 2011; Pelican et al., 2008). In Cameroonian Pidgin English, such people are called “bushfallers” (Nyamnjoh, 2005, 2011; Pelican et al., 2008). The term “bush” refers to the greener pastures to which certain Cameroonians emigrate and from which they are expected to send spoils in the form of money and gifts to those back home. To “fall bush” is to have successfully travelled out of the country and, according to these expectations, to be in a position therefore to provide for family in Cameroon.

Alpes (2011) presented an ethnographic analysis of bushfalling, with the aim of challenging accepted discourses of 'human trafficking' and 'illegal immigration', by focusing on the understanding of emigration, success and failure and legality/ legitimacy held by people in a “place of departure” (p13), i.e.: Buea, Cameroon. She found that the person “falling bush” (p19) was seen as an investment that could be capitalized upon by an extended network of people in the family and community, and therefore that required the mobilization of the capital needed to leave Cameroon.

Alpes argued that, “bushfallers are highly valued because they can change the fate and future of an entire family” (Alpes, 2011: 174). She noted that in the discourse of bushfalling, mobility was understood in terms of responsibility, and that it was for the most part, only

family members who “could be trusted to work hard and be loyal to their people back in Cameroon would be sponsored to go to bush.” (Alpes, 2011: 21). This sense of responsibility works to both empower and entrap successful bushfallers, as I discuss in the chapters that follow.

There are different levels and dimensions of bushfalling, taking into account both the ways in which it is achieved, as well as the status of the place of arrival in the geographically fragmented and hierarchically structured global political economy (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Falling bush to study abroad is held in higher esteem than those who “hustle”, and gaining a visa is preferable to travelling without legitimate papers. Western Europe, Scandinavia, the U.K., the U.S. or Canada are seen as preferable destinations, with the U.S. being the most desirable. Travel to Dubai, China or South Africa is also gaining currency, with migration brokers sending clients to Dubai or China, where visa laws are less restrictive than those in other countries. Successful bushfallers are expected to maintain connections with those back home (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Tazanu, 2012), situating themselves and their connections within transnational networks.

Alpes noted that: “In the absence of health insurance and other social securities provided by the state, the presence of a bushfaller abroad can be crucial for the survival and wellbeing of a family” (Alpes, 2011: 16). Also that, given the high monetary cost of sending a prospective bushfaller out of Cameroon, it was important to ensure that the person sent abroad would be responsible and would provide for the family, effectively becoming someone to call on for material support when needed (Alpes, 2011). In this thesis I argue that the Cameroonians embodied these responsibilities in different ways, constructing themselves as people who could be relied upon as a source of material support and social capital and justifying their families’ investment in their bushfalling ventures.

According to Alpes (2011: 41): “Bushfalling is the pursuit, against all odds of an opening in a context of closure, a chance to transform your life and the life of your family, to be transformed into a different category of people” (p45). To be a true bushfaller, one must not only leave Cameroon, but also make a success of life in the new country.

During my fieldwork, I made contact with a number of people who demonstrated varying levels of success at their bushfalling venture. Some were studying at South African universities, their academic enrolment legitimizing their status as successful bushfallers. Others struggled to achieve legitimacy through multiple way of being ‘in bush,’ and enrolled in a succession of academic or practical courses during the time that I worked with them, while also ‘hustling’ to earn money.

### **Leaving home**

Migration out of Cameroon has been well documented in the literature (de Bruijn, 2009, Fleisher, 2006; Nyamnjoh, 2005, 2011; Pelican et al., 2008), with some authors questioning the interplay between mobility, marginality and ICT. De Bruijn investigates the use of the mobile phone by people who inhabit “the mobile margins” in Cameroon (de Bruijn, 2009: 167). She suggests that although the label of marginality might suggest disconnection, the

people that she worked with had always been part of patterns of mobility. She found that the introduction of mobile technology was indeed reshaping society, but that the changes observed need to be situated within the social dynamics of the society being studied. In my research, I ask to what extent ICTs shape the ways in which Cameroonian students inhabit society. I also explore the ways in which the students appropriate the technology within their social interactions.

Throughout my fieldwork, Cameroonians spoke about the corruption endemic to the country and the ‘glass ceiling’ effect that this has on upward social and economic mobility. Reasons for leaving Cameroon are stated in the literature as a dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for its “economically, intellectually and – arguably – politically aspiring citizens” (Pelican et al., 2008: 117). The government of Cameroon has been blamed for these failures to support a growing population of unemployed and frustrated citizens, victims of the “cosmetic democracy” (Nyamnjoh 2002, see also Pelican et al., 2008: 117) practised by Cameroon’s incumbent government. Studies have examined reasons for leaving, the transnational experience of Cameroonians living apart from their families and communities, as well as the impact of the immigration of Cameroonians on their home communities (e.g.: de Bruijn, 2009, Nyamnjoh, 2005, 2011; Pelican et al., 2008).

While Cameroon is often seen by its citizens as offering little in the way of economic opportunity, other regions, particularly North America, Europe, and to a lesser extent South Africa, are seen as more desirable places to be (Pelican, 2008; Alpes: 2011: 12).

Fleischer (2007) has studied the factors that lead Cameroonians to migrate to Germany, paying particular attention to kinship dynamics. He argued that the decision to migrate is taken in consultation with members of the individual’s extended family. This is in partial contradiction to the findings of Alpes (2011), whose ethnographic study of bushfalling from Buea, Cameroon, suggested that plans to emigrate were kept secret, with family members often only finding out about the plans once the individual had already left the country. The literature suggests that young Cameroonians seeking to leave the country negotiate a fine line of openness and secrecy in their decision to leave the country, and that the strategic negotiation of networks and social capital is key to the success or failure of any bushfalling mission.

Themes of education and personal improvement emerged during my fieldwork, although often this was couched within discourses of improving oneself for the benefit of the community.

### **Cameroonian frontierspeople in Cape Town**

The group of Cameroonians with whom I worked inhabited many different but entangled frontiers. As migrants and bushfallers, they were pushing the boundaries of their geographic and social experience, “socially produced” (Kopytoff, 1987: 17) in their guise as frontiersmen by the factors necessitating migration. As students and young adults, they were inhabiting the frontiers of becoming that characterise the struggle to find one’s place in the world, seeking

and resisting responsibility and the attendant power and status. Finally, as users of ICT, they were negotiating the blurred boundaries between online and offline spaces and ways of being.

Kopytoff describes the frontier as a productive space, with his frontiersmen moving into what they perceived to be an “institutional vacuum” (although he does concede to the prior existence of societies in the frontier space) (Kopytoff, 1987: 25). The frontiers inhabited by the Cameroonians I worked with were certainly already populated, and yet open to what Warnier calls “the mobility of people and things, and the production of new political entities” (Warnier, 2012:52). Therefore the productive nature of the frontier experience emerged through the negotiating of challenges and boundaries as mobile people moved into and around this frontier.

### **Cameroon-South African Communication ecology**

I situate this study within the “Global Communication Ecology” (Horst and Miller in de Bruijn, 2009), referring to the complex ways in which technology shapes society, at the same time as society shapes technology, informed by cultural, social and communicative contexts. These processes take place within the “webs of significance” that provide a context for the young Cameroonians’ lives and their use of ICT.

Information and Communication Technologies, including cell phone technology, the internet and social media have all received a great deal of research attention and have been collectively referred to as a “phenomenon” (Rutgers, 2012) with the assumption that these technologies have the potential to fundamentally change the way that people interact in society, bringing both new possibilities and new dangers into the social world. The people who helped me in my research each had at least one cell phone, and sometimes more than one. They either had access to the internet via their laptops or by tapping in to the Wi-Fi available in certain public spaces.

Zegeye and Muponde note that “the sudden eruption of the private in the public, the choreography around wanting to speak privately in public into a highly personalised and privatized communication technology, all lead to the discomfiture and decomposition of the private individual” (2012: 125). They point out the paradox of intimacy/distance epitomized by the cell phone (and, by extension ICT) culture, whereby these technologies whose main function is to allow those absent to be present, ultimately excuse the absence of those who should be present (Zegeye & Muponde, 2012: 126).

“The cell phone touches almost every aspect of our lives, and almost everyone, whether we are communications and media theorists or inventors in science and technology, village goat herders or cattle ranch managers, poets or priests, politicians or street thugs, pimps or pirates, we are all in a network” (Zegeye & Muponde, 2012: 127). This observation could be extended past the cell phone to include any type of communication technology. We are all in a network of relationships sustained by technology. In this thesis, I investigate what this means for the daily lives, relationships and interactions of the people with whom I worked.

The mutual shaping of technology and society has been explored by a number of authors (e.g.: De Bruijn, 2009, Katz and Aspden, 1997 and Powell, 2012). De Bruin notes that

individuals appropriate technology and relate “it and the new possibilities it opens up to past experiences and future expectations” (de Bruijn, 2009: 168). These authors question the hype that surrounded the introduction of technologies such as the mobile phone and the internet, arguing that these technologies are domesticated and used in many different ways to help individuals as they navigate their lives, sometimes on the margins of society. Therefore society shapes technology just as technology shapes society.

Throughout the research process, I have tried to keep focused on the people using the technology, so that I understand better the way that they interact with, and through, these technologies and what meaning this has for their social lives.

### **Plan of discussion chapters**

This thesis consists of four chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion. In chapter two, I introduce the people who were instrumental in my inquires, and discuss the challenges and possibilities associated with doing anthropological research around ICT use. Chapter three deals with the concepts of social capital, networks and habitus and investigates how the Cameroonians embodied these concepts through their use of ICT. Chapter four builds on this foundation to ask how relationships of gifting, reciprocity and obligation are facilitated and frustrated by ICT use. In chapter five, I analyse the ways in which the people with whom I have worked construct and imagine themselves in the context of their lives-lived-with-Facebook.

What I have written here is by no means a complete account of the use of ICT by all young Cameroonians living in Cape Town. In the interests of clarity and focus, there were many themes that I had to leave out of my analysis which deserve more attention than I was able to give them due to the constraints of this Master’s thesis. Topics such as xenophobia, immigration restrictions, and the devastating effects of colonialism on Africa and the implications of this legacy on Africans of all races and nationalities, were recurring themes during my fieldwork. Given the focus of my research, these could only be included as part of the introduction and not analysed as deeply as I would have liked. Therefore, I follow many researchers before me in apologizing for the necessarily “partial truth” (Clifford, 1986) of this ethnographic account. It is viewed through the lens of my own senses, and focused both by my research question and my own personal history.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have stated my research question, and situated this piece of research within the larger project of which it forms a part. I have introduced the focus of my research as the use of information and communication technology by Cameroonian students in Cape Town. I have contextualised this study within the national spaces of Cameroon and South Africa, while recognising the overlapping transnational worlds inhabited by my target group. I have introduced the concept of bushfelling, and migration as movement into a frontier space. I have engaged with prior theory on the use of information and communication technology, including literature that focuses on the mutuality of the relationship between people and technology.

I have recognised that technology is a tool, used by people to build and sustain networks of meaning, relationships and social life, while remaining aware that these networks can act on the people who have created them.

I have taken a critical view on technology as facilitating freedom from hierarchical spaces of inequality. I have juxtaposed the freedom and mobility (if only of ideas) associated with information and communication technology, with barriers to movement associated with the control of transnational immigration, as well as social barriers such as xenophobia.

In chapter two I will set out the methodology that I used to design this study and gather and analyse data. I will introduce the Cameroonian students who made up my research sample and who patiently worked with me throughout the data-gathering phase of my research. I will situate myself within my research, and detail the challenges and mishaps that I encountered as part of the research process. Finally, I will discuss the ethical considerations that guided me in my data collection.

## **Chapter two**

### **The journey through the research**

#### **Introduction**

A methodology chapter is the story of the journey that starts with an idea, an interest, or a concern, moves through phases of love and hate, joy and anger, jubilation and despair, endures and acknowledges many processes of discovery and ends (hopefully) with a thesis. In this chapter I take the reader with me through the concern that sparked interest in the idea that eventually became the topic of my thesis. I explain the sampling process that I used, and introduce the people who, through their time and generous sharing of information, contributed to this work. I outline the methods of enquiry that I had planned to use to answer my research question, as well as the way in which they eventually manifested in the actual research. I also detail the challenges, mistakes and mishaps that I encountered along the way, both those that arrived intrinsic to the nature of my research, as well as the unforeseen setbacks which, although traumatic at the time, gave me deeper insight into the life-worlds of the people I was writing about. These setbacks also provided insight on my own life-world, recognising that my own experience and my place within the research I conduct is essential to a deeper understanding of mobility and belonging, in the context of the use of information and communication technology by Cameroonian students in Cape Town. I reflect on my own experience of, and involvement in this research, and finally discuss a number of ethical considerations that guided me in this process.

#### **Arriving at the topic**

The topic of my research evolved from my involvement in the research group: “Mobile Africa Revisited”, a collective of researchers from different countries in Africa, as well as the Netherlands, stating the aim of “combining historical and anthropological methods ... to address how people in Africa are appropriating new ICTs and how they did so in the past” (Mobile Africa Revisited). Initial meetings with my supervisor, Francis Nyamnjoh, guided my choice of young Cameroonians as a group with whom to investigate issues of mobility, belonging, and the use of information and communication technologies. This group of people represented a unique mix of mobilities, both geographical and social, as well as moving freely through the world of information and communication technologies.

I formulated the following research question:

“How do Cameroonian students in Cape Town transcend geographical and social boundaries through their social networks and community relations, as facilitated by the capabilities provided by ICTs?”

However, during the course of my research, it became evident that this question contained a number of untested assumptions, such as the assumption that Cameroonian students DO transcend geographical and social boundaries in this context, and also that “ICTs”, as an

independent agent provides certain communicative capabilities to the students in question. So my research question was reformulated to ask:

“Do (and if so, how do) Cameroonian students in Cape Town transcend geographical and social boundaries through their use of information and communication technology?”

This resulted in a more open formulation of the research question which was more conducive to ethnographic research.

### **My companions on the journey**

I used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling to recruit young Cameroonian students living in Cape Town, with the initial contacts being identified through the existing social networks of myself and my supervisor, and further people being identified through the networks of these initial contacts. Keisha, one of my initial contacts, organized a meeting of people who she thought would fit the sampling frame, so I was able to make contact with a large number of people at one time. The sampling frame was designed to include Cameroonian students living in Cape Town. It was not necessary to specify the use of ICT as a limiting factor for the sample, as all the students I encountered did use one or other (although generally multiple) forms of information and communication technology.

The people who made up my research sample were by definition travellers: mobile, searching and aspirational. They were young Cameroonians, all of whom had left their homes to come and work or study in Cape Town and living away from their families, friends and familiar places.

I worked with seven key contacts as well as with members of their extended social networks including: siblings, parents, cousins, in-laws, flatmates, classmates and friends, some of whom resided in Cape Town, while some remained in Cameroon and others resided in different countries. The pseudonyms by which the key contacts are known in this work are: Peter, Paul, Mokolo, Ahmed, Aaron, Keisha and Mata.

Ahmed and Aaron were not actually students for the whole time that the research was conducted, although Aaron enrolled in a Mechanical Engineering course in September 2012. Ahmed was employed as stable manager of a large farm about an hour's drive from Cape Town. All of the young Cameroonians were resident in Cape Town, South Africa, apart from Ahmed, who lived near Villiersdorp, a village in the Western Cape. Paul moved to South Korea towards the end of the data collection phase, providing another level of complexity to this study on Cameroonian transnational mobility and ICT-mediated communications.

Following is a brief introduction to the main people who helped co-construct this research:

#### ***Peter***

When I first met Peter, he was completing his honour's research in Sociology at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). At the time of writing up this thesis, Peter was in the second year of a Master's degree in Public Health at the University of Cape Town. He attended classes on the UCT Health Sciences campus. Peter's brother, sister in law, and two

sisters lived in Buea. His mother lived in a village just outside of Buea, and came into town to visit the family and for medical check-ups. I met Peter's family when I was in Buea for the Mobile Africa Revisited research workshop in January 2012. When I was sick with malaria on my visit to Cameroon, Peter's sister visited me in the hospital and prayed for me.

### ***Paul***

Paul had qualified as a Baptist minister before coming to South Africa from Cameroon. Between the time that I met him in 2011, and when he left South Africa in 2012, he lived in a flat on Ascension Street, Maitland (a suburb of Cape Town) with Mokolo and their flatmates. In 2012, Paul left South Africa to attend ACTS, a theological college in South Korea and at the time of writing this chapter, he was making plans to register for a PhD in the United States.

### ***Mokolo***

At the start of my research, Mokolo was in his first year of an undergraduate finance degree at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). He shared a flat in a central suburb of Cape Town with his sister Rose, as well as Paul and three other Cameroonians. Mokolo is the person I chat with most often on Facebook. His dream is to become a wealthy businessman, and to this end, he is constantly engaged in various projects of self-improvement, from learning different languages, to studying investment and business strategy. Mokolo also has links to Buea, where his mother lives, along with his brothers and sisters. During the most recent conversation I had with Mokolo, prior to writing this chapter, he informed me that he had been accepted for post graduate study at the University of Greenwich in the UK.

### ***Ahmed***

Ahmed was slightly older than the other young Cameroonians I worked with. He was also not studying, as the others were, but working as stable manager on a farm near my father's farm in Villiersdorp, a deciduous fruit farming area in the Western Cape. I met Ahmed through small-town gossip while I was living at my father's farm, following my hospitalization for malaria contracted in Cameroon. The local vet, who lived on the neighbouring farm to my father's, attended to the horses on the farm where Ahmed lived. He mentioned to Ahmed that I had been to Cameroon, and through him, Ahmed asked me to get in touch with him.

### ***Aaron***

Aaron lived within five minutes' walk of Ascension Street. When I first met him, he was enrolled in a physiotherapy course, and working part-time as a masseuse at Dolphin Beach Hotel in Tableview, a beach-side area of Cape Town. In 2012, he enrolled in a course in Mechanical Engineering. He also worked as an informal salesman in Cape Town city centre.

## ***Mata***

Mata lived with her sister Keisha and Keisha's husband, Solomon, in a different part of Maitland, the central Cape Town suburb in which Mokolo, Rose, Aaron and Paul lived. Mata was studying for her MA in economics and graduated in 2013.

## ***Keisha***

Keisha is the elder sister to Mata. Keisha and Solomon had two young children, who lived with Keisha's parents in Buea, Cameroon.

## **Discovering the field**

Gupta and Ferguson (1997) engaged with the idea of fieldwork as the defining feature of the anthropological endeavour. My 'field' stretched across continents, and also occupied the nebulous non-space created by communication between people in different localities. The places where I physically was while conducting my research converged on different points in and around the city of Cape Town, and the town of Buea in Cameroon. I spent most of my time between three homes in Maitland, much of it in one particular place on Ascension Street, where Mokolo and Paul lived, along with other young Cameroonians.

The realities of balancing work and studies, as well as my own mobility, prevented the ideal continuous, sustained immersion in the lives of the Cameroonians. This meant that fieldwork was staccato, fragmented, and therefore often very frustrating and a limitation in this piece of research. The fact that each person I visited lived in a separate place, contributed to a fractured visiting schedule, rather than an extended period of absorption into a particular geographic area and constituting a bounded field. Despite these limitations, I spent as much time as possible with the key people involved in this research, and members of their networks, absorbing, observing, participating, and questioning, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of their experience of the world, where the use of ICT is part of everyday life and social interaction. Also, as the focus of my research was Information and Communication Technology, I was able to use this enforced distance from the people in my study to become a participant-observer in social networks maintained through ICT.

My research was therefore shaped by a series of flexible and myriad encounters by me, with me, and with those and by those I was researching.

This potential for the anthropologist to conduct research, drawing on the input of an individual or group of people, no matter how far away each party may be from the other, challenges conventionally accepted definitions of 'the field'.

These ideas surrounding the problems created by space can be extended to take into consideration the issue of 'cyberspace', or the place between spaces where human interaction occurs. Questions arise as to whether this is indeed a space, or what implications arise from the fact that spaces are increasingly being able to be traversed by peoples' use of information and communication technologies. Gupta and Ferguson claim that "...notions of locality or community (may) refer both to a demarcated physical space and to clusters of interaction"

(Gupta & Ferguson, 1992: 8). This attribute of online space meant that I was able to conduct my 'fieldwork', even when I was not physically in the field.

This idea of 'the field' being simultaneously 'here', 'there', 'everywhere' and 'nowhere' is, according to Gupta and Ferguson, indicative of the fact that "questions of space and place are, in this deterritorialized age, more central to anthropological representation than ever" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992: 18). These authors cite the importance of taking into account the "...profound 'bifocality' that characterizes locally lived lives in a globally interconnected world" (Peters, in Gupta & Ferguson, 1992: 11). The young people who helped me in my work used information and communication technology to live, not only bifocal, but multifocal lives. I have taken these ideas into account while designing the methodology of my study and conducting my research, and hope to have produced research that can contribute to the anthropological investigation of questions of space and place in this deterritorialized age.

### **Methods used: Fieldwork in an unconventional field**

Anthropology has been criticised for eclipsing the voices of those represented in the finished monograph within an argument that might be overly influenced by the prejudices and preconceptions of the anthropologist (Nyamnjoh, 2012: 67). Therefore we are challenged to strike a balance between ensuring that voices are heard and privileged, while questioning the information provided in interviews, interrogating it informed by what has been seen, heard or felt, rather than innocently relying on what we are told. Anthropologists must constantly negotiate a balance between being faithful to the voices of the people we study and our own observations to which we, through proximity or prejudice, may be blinded.

I used ethnographic methods to conduct my research. Ethnography involves "direct and sustained contact with agents, and ... richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording and representing, at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience" (Willis & Trodman, 2000: 5). Through its emphasis on extended fieldwork and thick description (Geertz, 1973), ethnographic participant observation allows for the everyday lived experiences of people to be recorded and interpreted by the ethnographer in order to move towards a deeper understanding and interpretation of the way that they make sense of their world.

My participant observation encompassed the whole field of my study, including physically 'hanging out' with the young Cameroonians, but also integrating myself into the social networks they sustained through their ICT use, while at the same time they were integrated into mine. The mutuality of this integration was something to be questioned. I visited the Cameroonians at their homes and places of study, as well as accompanying them on errands and visits of their own. We sent each other requests to be added as friends on Facebook, and exchanged cell phone numbers and email address. Ahmed and I added each other on Whatsapp, a free text messaging service. I was invited to parties by Paul, Mokolo and Aaron, although not by Mata and Keisha. I debated with myself whether to invite them to one of my birthday parties, but eventually decided against it, wanting to maintain some distance from my research, and bringing up questions of power dynamics - who was I to be the one to

decide whether to accept or extend invitations? Although, in the case of Mata and Keisha, the desire to maintain distance and privacy applied in both directions: from researched to researcher and vice versa.

Gaining access to the Cameroonians' individual pages on the social networking site: Facebook allowed me to analyse their photograph collections, as well as the text-based interactions between individuals and members of their social networks that these photographs, posted in a semi-public way, elicit.

Because my research focussed on the use of information and communication technology as an integral part of their existence and social interaction, it was necessary to modify 'traditional' methods of ethnographic fieldwork to account for the fact that not all of what I wanted to study could be 'observed' in the traditional sense, and indeed, that much of the interaction that I was interested in took place in the 'space between places' that arises with the opportunity to communicate remotely, facilitated by ICT.

While I used 'traditional' participant observation, I also used in-depth interviews and diaries completed by the young Cameroonians themselves to fill in the gaps of what I was unable to examine through the use of my own senses.

These semi-structured and informal interviews with my target group, who were the focus of my research, as well as their friends and family, were for me to gain an insight into the aspects of transnational communication which were not available to me through watching, listening, smelling and feeling.

In an attempt to get a glimpse of the interactions taking place through the use of ICT, I asked that three of the people who helped me in my study complete a 'Communications Diary' over the course of two weeks. The aim of the diaries was to gain access to communication patterns, which, as I mentioned above would be difficult to observe, and may be inaccurately recalled for the purposes of a retrospective interview (See Coxon, 1988). These diaries were designed to be "systematic in form and specific to the domain of interest" (Coxon, 1988: 2), and therefore ideal for analysing data specific to the use of ICT by those I studied.

The diaries were accompanied by an informational paragraph, including a suggestion regarding how to structure each entry. Although the diaries did give me a fair idea of the general structure of communication patterns, the students' busy schedules prevented them from completing the diaries with sufficient detail to justify their use as a rich data source. Only three of them completed the diaries, and of these, two contained hastily scribbled notes, with too little substance to be of use analytically.

However, Mokolo did complete the diary in great detail, and the data gathered through this diary was useful in providing a base for interviews, alerting me to issues for discussion of which I may previously have been unaware, as well as providing an example of a day in the life of the Cameroonians with regard to their communications via ICT. For example, Mokolo had written in a diary entry that he had been chatting online with the Lord Mayor of his home town in Cameroon, which led me to question whether he knew this public figure personally,

and led to a deeper understanding of issues of networking and community in the lives of the young Cameroonians.

The fact that I was researching the use of information and communication technologies meant that fieldwork was not confined to a specific field ‘site’, but could take place anywhere, as long I had access to my cell phone and/or the internet. Often, someone I had been working with would contact me ‘just to say hi’, and the resulting conversation would constitute valuable data. Similarly, the fact that I had access to individuals’ Facebook profiles, allowed me to conduct fieldwork even when I did not physically inhabit the same space as those who helped me in my research.

The context of the study called for a multi-sited approach to the ethnography. This was necessary to take into account the fact that the people I worked with lived in Cape Town, South Africa, but claimed as “home” a specific place in South West Cameroon, and also maintained relationships with family and friends in different places around the world. The approach needed to account for lives lived in different places, in some ways seemingly unbounded by geographical space, and yet simultaneously restricted by the laws that protect the very boundaries that mobile people bend, transgress and negotiate many times a day in the context of their lives.

Multi-sited ethnography is a methodological trend that seeks to respond to the need to adapt ethnographic practices in order to investigate more complex objects of study. According to Marcus (1995), “Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the ‘local’ and the ‘global,’ the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system.’” When designing the methodology of this trans- and non-national study, I had to take into account the context of both countries relevant to the research, in this case, Cameroon and South Africa, the global political economy, the context of any other place that the young Cameroonians and their communication partners happen to be, as well as the space created through interactions mediated by ICT.

### **A visit to Buea, Cameroon**

I had the opportunity to make the journey to Buea, Cameroon in January 2012, at the beginning of the second year of my research period. Buea is the home town of Mokolo, Peter, Keisha and Mata, four of the Cameroonians I worked with, and I was able to meet and conduct interviews with members of their families, as well as conducting observation in their home town. The visit and interviews allowed me to gain further data and an additional perspective. I was now privileged to have this new perspective of the family members that they had left behind in Cameroon.

The following is an excerpt from my field notes, describing my first impressions of Buea:

“After breakfast at the house I shared with the Mobile Africa research group, a little way off the main road of Buea, we headed out to town to change money and buy Cameroonian sim cards. I had not seen the road to town, as we had arrived in the dark the night before, but

upon leaving, we saw that the way up to the house was a dirt track, winding its way through houses and apartments interspersed between fields of maize and cassava and various shops and industries. Chickens ran in the road ahead of us as we drove past open-air carpenters' shops where men worked massive pieces of red-brown wood under the shade of banana palms, and hair salons with dark interiors into which women disappeared for hours and emerged weaved or dreadlocked to perfection.

We turned out of our dirt road onto the main street, which Francis, my supervisor, referred to as "Anaconda Street", given its apparently legendary length. The street was packed with cars and the sidewalks crammed with stalls and pedestrians, with bars, cell phone recharge booths, outdoor barbeques and pharmacies dominating the commercial landscape. The bars were small, with pastel-coloured plastic chairs outside and were populated mainly by men, while the barbeques and recharge booths were shaded by colourful umbrellas and alternated control of the territory of the street corners."

The opportunity to observe the home context of the people I was working with was absolutely invaluable to my research in ways that I could not have envisioned before I made the journey. Although I was able to spend time with my target group in Cape Town, this visit to their home town allowed me a deeper glance into the context of their lives and encouraged me to look at Cape Town in a way that they might see it. The immersion into the sights, sounds and smells of Cameroon brought me a little closer to understanding what they were talking about when they said: 'home', but also shifted my perception of the Cameroonians in Cape Town away from the label of 'foreigners' to just people in a different place.

### **Challenges, mistakes and mishaps**

Anthropological fieldwork entails a deep engagement with real life encounters, with all its messiness, challenges and unforeseen mishaps. Often these challenges, although painful at the time, allow the anthropologist a privileged insight into questions of self and other, mobility and immobility, intimacies and distances that ultimately contribute to their understanding of the world and allow for more sensitive and nuanced research. A major personal mishap came in January of the second year of my research period, in the middle of my fieldwork. I had gone to Cameroon to attend the Mobile Africa Revisited writing workshop, and to conduct fieldwork with the families of the people I was working with, when I succumbed to a serious case of malaria. I was far away from my family and familiar support networks and surroundings, in a foreign country, and very, very ill. I was incapacitated and weaker than I have ever been before or since. As a result of this, I lay back and observed as support networks mobilized themselves around me to get me comfortable, into treatment and eventually back home to South Africa. I felt desperation and despair, hope and gratitude, and a brief taste of suffering. I experienced first-hand the frustration of not being able to get to where you need to be, both in terms of physical movement as well as moving from a state of illness to a state of health, which in turn highlighted the value of family and personal networks for overcoming obstacles to mobility and wellbeing. Here again, encounters, both familiar and unfamiliar shape research and its orientation in unpredictable ways.

## **Me and my research**

Nyamnjoh questions the bounded notion of reflexivity as “the ability to determine, surface and factor in the extent to which our dispositions, social backgrounds and social positions influence, in often veiled and subtle ways, the perspectives we hold on how different or similar to us those we study are.” (Nyamnjoh, 2012: 66). He alerts us to the fact that reflexivity should be intrinsic to the study right from the moment of conception of the first draft of the research question, and that this reflexive approach should be carried throughout the course of anthropological research. I tried to remain reflexive throughout both my fieldwork and the process of writing up my findings.

I asked myself: “How does my personal history and subjectivity as a researcher bounce off, rub up against, and subdue and amplify certain meanings and ways of being of the people that I worked with?” I wondered how social truth was negotiated between myself as the researcher and the Cameroonian students I was observing, interviewing and writing about.

In my life I have been privileged to be able to travel with more freedom than many people. Even before I began my research, and as I was allowed deeper access to the lives and stories of the people who helped me in this study, I was, and became increasingly, aware of the inequality that pervades and disciplines mobility, as it pervades and structures most things in this world. I was able to travel out of a difficult situation, but not everyone was as lucky as I was. The economic system that structures our world ensures instrumental barriers to mobility, just as borders between nation states and the laws that enforce and solidify them ensure physical and legal barriers, and the threats such as xenophobia provide social barriers. However, as I continued my research, I became increasingly aware of the different ways in which people negotiated mobility and belonging in the face of these barriers and instances of inequality, drawing on resources and networks to ensure that they stay mobile within a global system that works to keep them fixed.

It is important, at this point in the history of anthropology, to note that the ‘traditional’ conception of an anthropologist is a white, ‘Western’ researcher leaving the hallowed halls of academia to go and study a group of people somewhere; people who are assumed to be qualitatively different enough from the anthropologist to warrant academic interest. Historically, anthropological studies of, and in Africa have essentialised African identities and fixed these to places, carving the continent into sections, inhabited by the appropriate group of people (Nyamnjoh, 2012: 68). Researching mobile people, who are part of multiple networks and communities and involved in the project of constructing themselves, while they conduct transnational relationships, rendered this conception misguided at best. Also, my own identity as a South African researcher unsettled this idea of fixed and unproblematic African identities. Contemporary theory in anthropology, including the writings of anthropologists who may previously have been classified as ‘marginal(ised)’, as well as my own fieldwork experience, has made it clear that this conception of the practice of anthropology is no longer tenable in the world as it is today. Firstly, the idea that people other than the anthropologist can be studied as a closed system or ‘culture’, to be compared to the ‘culture’ of the anthropologist is nothing short of ridiculous. In the world of overlapping and intertwined circles and networks, both boundaries and belonging are things that must be

inscribed and reinforced. At the same time, the very concept of space and place as fixed has been challenged by contemporary theorists (e.g.: Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, 1997). Similarly, the binaries of centre/ periphery, North/South, West/ ‘the Rest’ etc. are being decentred, so that the idea of anthropology as a ‘science’ that involves an anthropologist studying people in villages needs to be drastically rethought if the discipline is to remain faithful to the realities of the world today.

While recognising that my embodied experience, informed by the entire mix of embodiment, socialization, inner and outer beliefs and practices, is different from that of the young Cameroonians who helped me in my study, we could share certain important experiences that allowed us to connect and share in certain aspects of life. For instance, the fact that I and the young Cameroonians I worked with were all students, allowed us to connect on a different level from people who may have no idea what it is like to be a student in Cape Town between 2011 and 2013.

The structuring effect of tertiary and post graduate education on one’s life is not to be underestimated, and provides a platform for shared support, understanding, congratulations and commiserations, that helps to bind students together and allowed for identification between myself as an anthropologist, and the people I worked with in my study.

The idea of the anthropologist as an outsider, completely separate from her/his informants, is another assumption that has been continually challenged and rethought in the context of my own fieldwork. My entanglement with the people in my study has made itself felt in subtle ways, such as bumping into Rose, the sister of Mokolo, visiting my neighbour, or Peter sharing an academic supervisor with my mother. All these things serve to remind me that, although we are all having unique experiences in this city and beyond, my life and the lives of the people about whom I am writing are not as separate as ‘traditional’ anthropological practice would have us believe. This entanglement of my life with those of the students I was writing about highlighted the importance of mobility and encounters, and how they shape research and its perspectives. Connections are everywhere, and it is through our entangled networks that we realise our humanity.

Although to some extent I claim mutual belonging and identity with the people with whom I worked, extended fieldwork has shown that there are also many ways in which our experience diverges, in often tragic ways, reflective of the injustice of the world we live in. The following excerpt from my field notes in box 2.1 illustrates this point:

***Box 2.1 “My Ticket to Hell”- The challenges of (im)mobility in a world of inequality***

I was at the home of Mata and Keisha, watching a feature on Al Jazeera about African immigrants living in Europe. The feature started with the story of a young woman who lived with her daughter in a small flat in Holland. She had been unable to find a job, and her landlady had demanded that she go to the red light district to sell her body so that she would be able to pay her rent, as apparently, that was what “all the other girls” did. The story went on describing the desperation of this woman, until eventually it came to an interview with the woman herself, standing on the banks

of the river where she had planned to commit suicide. She had apparently had an epiphany at the last minute and not gone through with it. However, this does not detract from the fact or circumstances that were so bad, that this woman felt that she had to end her life.

We were all sitting in silence, watching this programme. A few comments were made. I don't remember them. I was too horrified at the fact that things could get so bad for some people, leaving their homes to find a better life, and then finding themselves in a situation that they could not escape and was worse than the one that they had left.

The following feature was presented by a citizen journalist, an immigrant who worked as a hotel janitor, also in Holland. He started out his feature standing in front of a pet hotel, where Europeans send their dogs to stay when they go on holiday. Apparently, the cost for a dog to stay at the hotel for one night was fifteen Euros - the daily basic wage of the reporter. The programme continued with an interview with two Europeans, who were explaining to the reporter, without irony, that, yes of course their dogs had passports, how else would they be able to travel otherwise?

By this time I was incredibly ashamed to be one of the privileged ones in this unfair world. I felt the enormity of the problems that lead to inequality and the futility of any effort on my part to make any difference. I wondered what it is that allows some people to be born into luxury, while others have to struggle every day of their existence. I thought about my home that I could go back to, with my mother there to comfort me, the food that I could prepare whenever I wanted to, based more on what I felt like eating than any kind of budgetary constraint. I thought about the farm that I can escape to whenever the city gets too much for me, and about my friends and family, all just a phone call away. Keisha brought me out of my reverie, commenting on the way in which immigrants are treated and the conditions under which they must live. She told me, "When I flew into Johannesburg and saw the lights, I was so happy. I didn't know then that this would be my ticket to hell." – Extract from Field notes 25 August 2011

This fieldwork session made me realise the importance of taking into account the socio-economic context of the young students that I worked with, particularly in reference to the way in which the international political economy is structured in such a way as to allow for such inequality, and the way that this inequality in turn shapes and structures their lives as well as making me keenly aware of my own place within these structures.

### *Inside and outside*

Recognising both the networked nature of society and the borders and boundaries that exist and are manifested in various ways in my life and the lives of the people I studied, I wondered: In what way(s) could I be considered an insider, and in what ways could I be considered an outsider, and to what degree am I both at the same time? Throughout my research it became evident that I was not always clearly one or the other, but was often simultaneously an insider and an outsider. My classification into such categories was always situational, depending on the context in which I and the people with whom I worked found

ourselves. This dictated the appropriateness of the unique habitus (See Bourdieu, 1977) that each one of us brought to the mix.

For example, reviewing Peter's thesis with the aim of giving him suggestions on how to condense it into an article for publication reminds me yet again how it is impossible to separate my relationship as researcher-informant in my MA study from our lives as friends and contemporaries.

The fact that the young Cameroonians I was studying and writing about were also my contemporaries allowed for a reciprocal interaction throughout the research process, whereby my interpretations and conclusions were constantly being checked by the subjects of the text themselves, mitigating some of the power imbalance between researcher and researched throughout the history of anthropology as a discipline.

***Familiarity of Space - Degrees of 'going native'***

Fieldwork is about making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. This applies both to things and people and includes the researcher's own familiarities and unfamiliarities. There were times during my research that felt intimately familiar, and yet, there were other parts that felt distinctly strange and unsettling. Often, when I had arrived at a point where I felt that the strange had at last become familiar, something would happen to upset this delicate equilibrium and remind me that I was not as secure in my knowledge as I had previously thought. The following extract from my field notes in box 2.2 provides an example of one such occasion:

***Box 2.2 Lost in my familiar field site***

I had arranged to meet Louis, the son of someone I had met in Cameroon, to deliver a CD of photos. I called him one Tuesday evening, using my cellphone from my bedroom. He sounded pleased to hear from me, saying that his father had told him that I was going to call. We made arrangements to meet at Nandos in Maitland, the choice of venue being my suggestion, as I recalled driving past it on the way back from Home Affairs with Aaron the other day, and assumed that it would be known to anyone who spent a large amount of time in Maitland, as Louis said he did. We said our goodbyes and hung up the phone, promising to see each other the following day.

There was traffic already when I headed out into Main Street and down the N1 towards Maitland. I felt my chest tighten with the familiar irrational panic that sets in when I am surrounded by too many cars, all moving too slowly, frustrating my desire to get as fast as possible to where I want to go to. I took the M5 off ramp and sat in more traffic on the short approach to Maitland. This area was my main field site, and I felt the calm of the familiar wash over me. I knew this place. I belonged here, if only to a small degree. I knew my way around, and was not as lost as I was when I first came here, or when I visit other, less familiar places.

I passed Home Affairs... My mind stopped, although my body kept driving. If I had passed Home Affairs, then I had missed Nandos. But I had been paying attention and carefully looking out for it, I thought, confused, and weighed up my options. I could not go back down Main Road, as by now the traffic was so heavy that it would take me a good twenty minutes to cover the same distance as I had just done in five. I was out of airtime, so I could not even text Louis to tell him that I would be late. I turned the car around in a side road and stopped

and thought for a minute, my mental representation of Maitland Main Road growing hazier by the second as I tried to recall the positioning of Nandos, a ghostly shopfront popping up and disappearing at varying positions on an imaginary map as I tried to place it in my mind. Was it opposite Home Affairs? No. Near the tailor's shop? No. Was it possibly further down Main Road, on the other side of the intersection? I didn't know. Was it even on Main Road at all? Maybe it was actually down near Aaron's house. Maybe I had completely fabricated the existence of a Nandos in Maitland. But Louis had agreed readily enough to meet there, so it had to be here somewhere.

By this time, I was ten minutes late and did not have time to go searching for an elusive chicken restaurant. I decided to call on my support networks. One of the young Cameroonians would know where Nandos was, if it indeed existed. I crossed Main Road and drove down Ascension street in the direction of the corner store next door to Mokolo's house. I parked the car opposite the store, got out and ran across the road to the shop. I asked for fifty rand airtime, and while it was loading, asked the shopkeeper whether he knew where to find Nandos. He did not know what I was talking about, which did not help my increasing panic. I loaded the airtime into my phone, and as I was doing so, received an sms from Louis telling me that he would be a little bit late. I thanked the universe and sent him a reply telling him not to worry, that I was late also, before dialling Aaron's number and listening to the ringing tone while I waited for him to pick up.

Aaron gave me directions, pointing me to the section of Main Road that I had skipped out when I took my first shortcut up Ascension Street. I thanked him profusely and headed back up to the intersection, sitting in traffic that turned out to be not as bad as I had feared. I met Louis and gave him the disk of photos that I had made, containing three portraits of his father, as well as a couple of landscapes of Bamenda and the surrounding country. I had achieved my objective with the help of my friends, and I felt strong enough to face the traffic on the way."- Field notes 14 March 2012

This extract illustrates the ways in which the familiar can suddenly become strange, and the privileged knowledge of the insider can often be taken for granted. Episodes like the one described above, helped to remind me to keep questioning what I thought was familiar. Losing myself within my familiar field site was a powerful metaphor for the entire research process, whereby belonging is being constantly negotiated, and insider- or outsider-status is never fixed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I was guided by the Ethical Guidelines and Principles of Conduct for Anthropologists accessed at the website of Anthropology Southern Africa.

In the first meeting with the people with whom I was to work for my MA research, and prior to all interviews, I provided each person with an "informed consent" form. This document detailed the aims and nature of the study and explained the conditions of participation. Each person I worked with was informed that his/her participation was entirely voluntary, and that they could decline to participate in any part of the study with which they did not feel entirely comfortable, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Pseudonyms have been used to protect identities, and to ensure the anonymity of interview, field note and diary data.

Conducting ‘online observation’ of Facebook pages raised unique ethical issues in that it is possible to observe individuals’ online activities without them being aware of this ‘anthropological gaze’. There were unique ethical considerations to be taken into account when conducting this online observation, as there is a fine line here between observation and voyeurism.

Permission to use this data was negotiated during the course of fieldwork, and the resulting analysis was discussed with the person to whom it belonged before it was included in my thesis. This process unfolded as a natural and unstructured aspect of my online sociality with the young Cameroonians. For example, Mokolo and I were often on Facebook at the same time during the day, and we would send chat messages to each other if we saw that the other was online. The content of these conversations was mostly about our lives and our studies, but if I had been working on a section of my thesis that required the use of data from his Facebook page, I would take the opportunity of our chat to request permission to use that data.

Throughout the research process, I constantly checked the conclusions that were emerging from my analysis with follow-up interviews. I employed a dialectical approach to observation, analysis, and interviewing to ensure that I remained engaged with my data and analysis throughout the process, checking observations against conferences with the interviewees about my interpretations, and these interpretations against continued observation. Throughout the fieldwork and analysis stage, Peter and I discussed my data and the embryonic conclusions I was drawing. When I submitted an abstract, which was accepted for presentation on the work that formed the basis for my chapter on gifting, reciprocity and obligation at the Anthropology Southern Africa Conference in 2011, Peter read a draft of my paper, and provided extremely useful comments and reflections, which endorsed the validity of my argument, as well as enriching it with alternative perspectives.

This practice of remaining constantly accountable to the people I was writing about in my research, although a very good idea on paper, manifested itself in constant anxiety on my part which, hopefully, contributed to a more sensitive and reflexive project. Throughout the process I was forced into reflexivity, as my data gathering, analysis and writing was not only answerable to my own internal ethics, but also to a group of highly educated, critical thinkers. This situation was daunting to say the least and I have spent the past two years in constant fear of misrepresenting them in some way.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have introduced the process by which I arrived at my topic and research question. I explained my sampling framework and introduced the Cameroonians who helped me in this research endeavour. I discussed the concept of the anthropological ‘field’, and questioned its applicability to my own research, leading me to challenge accepted ideas of ‘field’ and ‘space’.

I set out the methods that I used, primary among these being participant observation, central to ethnography in that it aims to gain a deeper understanding of the life worlds of the people

studied. I discussed the use of online participant observation. This was an essential component, as the focus of this study is ICT use. I have included an excerpt from my field notes describing a research trip to Buea, Cameroon, to share my experience of the home context of the Cameroonians with the reader. I have drawn on my personal experience to describe the way in which support networks mobilised to help me survive illness and powerlessness in what was for me a foreign country.

I have situated myself within this piece of research, particularly in relation to the inequality of mobility, the experience of being a student, and whether I could be considered an insider or an outsider in the circles of belonging in which and through which the Cameroonians moved. Finally, guided by the ethical codes of the Anthropological Association of South Africa, I have engaged with the ethical issues that I encountered in the process of conducting this research.

In the following chapter I will examine the use of ICT by Cameroonian students in Cape Town through the lens of social capital, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu. I will present an ethnographic section describing a visit to the Department of Home Affairs, and contrast this example of disempowerment with the power and success associated with popular conceptions of 'bushfalling'. I will demonstrate the ways in which the Cameroonians drew on their networks of social capital to give them an advantage over others who may be similarly disadvantaged by the hierarchies inherent in the global political economy. Finally, I will touch on the importance of social support and the ways in which ICTs can be used to facilitate the giving and receiving of such support.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Social Capital, Networks and Habitus in the networks of Cameroonian students in Cape Town**

#### **Introduction**

The world has been fractured into discontinuous (although overlapping and interconnected) spaces, organized hierarchically along lines of wealth and political power (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). These power imbalances contribute to inequality and inform and sustain desires to move, reinforcing inequality as people move from a situation of perceived and/or actual disadvantage to one seen to be more lucrative. These inequalities produce the conditions for differential social capital, as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). However, the subtle interweaving of ICT through the lives of people in the world, allows linkages and networking across these fragmented spaces. Castells argues that: "...networking logic induces a social determination on a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: The power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power" (Castells, 2000:500). In this chapter I take into account the existence of fragmented, hierarchically organized space, while observing the ways in which the people I worked with negotiated the boundaries of these spaces using ICT. I examine power, disempowerment, global hierarchies, and strategies through which the young people with whom I worked struggled, attempted and succeeded to empower themselves in a world where open-ended, flexible relations were key to their success. I provide an example of the disempowerment of one individual through the South African state's curtailing of his mobility. I introduce the ways in which the Cameroonians used ICT tactically to empower themselves, as well as to draw on networks of social support.

#### **Power, privilege and hierarchies in an interconnected world**

To Bourdieu, society is structured by power relations, which are dependent on the amount of capital held by individuals within the different fields within society (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu recognized that the notion of capital goes beyond just economic capital, in that there are many different resources upon which people can draw (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition to economic capital, he identified two other forms, namely cultural capital and social capital. While, economic capital can be converted directly into money, cultural and social capital represent indirect forms of capital, in that they can be converted into economic capital under certain circumstances and yet are not themselves directly convertible into money. Under Bourdieu's conceptualization, cultural capital takes the form of educational qualifications, while social capital is made up of connections and social obligations (Bourdieu, 1986: 47). Capital in its various forms "is what makes the games of society- not least the economic game - something other than simple games of chance offering at each moment the possibility of a miracle" (Bourdieu, 1986: 46). Bourdieu did not accept a purely economic theory of perfect competition within an equal playing field. Rather, he noted that players enter the field with significantly different levels of advantage which affected their chances of success. For

Bourdieu, to have access to capital and the ability to draw on it was to have the power to succeed within the social field.

Bourdieu explained that the way in which the different types of capital are distributed and structured dictate the structure of the social world and the chances of success of individuals within that world. He defined capital as: “The set of constraints, inscribed within the very reality of (the) world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices” (Bourdieu, 1986: 46). Under Bourdieu's conceptualization, it is the relative amount of capital that is important, rather than the absolute amount, and it is those with the most of “the right type” of capital who have the most power (De Nooy, 2008: 13).

For the young Cameroonians in my study, their belonging to multiple networks was the key to their access to capital. Peter had drawn on this very successfully in gaining access to further education. When I first met Peter, he was in his honours year at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town. For his research project, he had been working with a researcher at the University of Cape Town's Medical School on a larger project which was related to his research topic. When it was time to apply for a MA degree, the lead researcher on the project provided Peter with information about the course, and assisted him with references to increase his chances of being accepted into the Master's in Public Health programme at UCT Medical School, also acting as a source of capital.

Writing on new media and Cameroonian transnational sociality, Primus Tazanu notes that “narratives, expectations, imaginations and media practices are deeply imbedded within financial and power inequalities inherent in trans-border social ties, and that “the disparities are themselves underpinned by participants' location within certain national spaces and places and the association of these places with wellbeing and capabilities.” (Tazanu, 2012: 260).

The Cameroonians I worked with had different, geographically contingent, experiences of capital and power relations. When I worked with them in Cape Town, between 2011 and 2013, they were comparatively poor economically in that, being full-time students, they had limited earning power. Their status as nationals of African countries other than South Africa potentially placed them at a disadvantage, both in terms of the attitudes of South African citizens, as well as restrictive laws and policies imposed by the South African state. They were also not yet qualified in their professions, and therefore had not been recognized to have proven themselves in the field of education.

In the words of Ahmed:

*“Well, you need to work very hard to meet up with your life. You need to work very hard, work extremely long hours. You need to struggle to be somebody. You can't sit still and expect to have a good life”.* – (Ahmed, interviewed 15 February 2011)

As non-South African, and yet African nationals, the students I worked with were at risk of being targeted for marginalisation and thus disempowerment by the South African state with its obstructive immigration laws.

### ***Box 3.1***

Aaron let me accompany him to Home Affairs to apply to extend his visa. We approached a huge metal shed, the massive sliding door of which was open, with a lady in a Home Affairs uniform standing guard.

We milled around along the side of the square for a few minutes, Aaron asking where the queue for renewals was, while I watched the people watching me, both sides with undeniable curiosity.

Although I could see the suggestion of lines snaking their way through the crowd, it was almost impossible to tell where one started and another began, and even more hopeless to try and tell which end of which queue was for which purpose.

We joined what we thought was the end of a queue, next to a large man who greeted us with a nod, and went back to waiting.

By the time I left, we had been there for an hour and Aaron and his little group were still exactly where they were when we arrived.

I was at the Department of Home Affairs, by choice or curiosity. I had no papers that needed renewing that might determine whether I could stay in my chosen country of residence. When a fight broke out in the shed full of people, I could easily have left, yet those who were there with me could not. They HAD to stay, bound by legal obligation to renew their papers or face deportation and bound by the poor or apathetic administration at the Department of Home Affairs to stand in near-interminable queues, the end of which may or may not yield an extended visa.

This experience of Home Affairs seems to be far removed from the idealised conception of people who have the opportunity and take it to move out of Cameroon in search of a better life. This is in contrast to the perception of Cameroonian “bushfallers” as those who are relatively better off, having ‘made it’ out of the country. These conceptions often contrast starkly with the experiences of the students in this study, and this was made even clearer during my visit to Home Affairs. The visa applicants were obliged to arrive more than an hour before the opening of Home Affairs, and to take at least half a day off work in order to have the time to stand in a queue for the five hours it took to secure an appointment. They were treated with minimal respect by the Home Affairs employees, and a lack of organization, administration and signage resulted in confusion that could cost even more time. After this process was successfully navigated, it was not certain that an applicant’s visa would be renewed, which could result in deportation.

### **Tactics of empowerment- Social capital**

The young Cameroonians used their cell phones and the internet instrumentally in sustaining social networks as well as mobilizing networks of social capital.

Box 3.2 contains an excerpt from the participant diary of Mokolo, where he documented his use of ICT over the course of three weeks. This excerpt follows Mokolo through a day in his life in Cape Town.

***Box 3.2: A day in the life of Mokolo and his communication network***

Wednesday 31 August 2011

07:30

I received a call from my uncle who lives in the capital of Cameroon, Yaounde. He called to find out how we are doing with studies and how is life. He also wanted to ask the right time to give us a call. I told him that he should no mind, that I would give him a call in the evening.

08:16

I received a call from a Cameroonian friend. The friend celled to find out if we were still going to take a trip to Robben Island. I told the friend that things have changed and we were going to take the trip maybe next week if God wills it. I said I was sorry for any inconvenience caused.

08:30

I made a call to my friend Robert. My reasons for calling him was to know if he would be on campus today.

12:00

Went on Facebook. I receive a friend request from my cousin who lives in the village (in Cameroon) and also had a message from him that there has been (no) communication between us since I left for South Africa. I told him that I lost my phone at Joburg with most of the contacts. I congratulate him with his exams and that he should proceed to GEE, advanced level examinations. I also asked him to send me his number.

13:33

I received a text message from my sister, Rose. She was texting that I should help her out with the download of notes from the e-learning website (of the university).

14:37

I received a call from a Cameroonian folk called Mr Stuart. The reason for his calling was that I should help him out with the download of update folder for McAfee anti-virus.

17:55

I received a call from Mr Berry, a senior (older) friend who is now studying in Korea. He called to find out how I am doing and also reminded me that we are going to Skype over the

weekend.

17:58

I received a text message from Vanessa (a friend of Mokolo's from university). She was updating me on how she spent her day with a friend. And also she was feeling bored.

The data gathered from these diaries was very useful in providing a conceptual structure of the Cameroonians' use of ICT. In this excerpt, we can see that Mokolo used his cell phone as the main means of communication, both receiving and making calls and text messages, and using Facebook and Skype, as well as making use of their university's e-learning technology. This particular excerpt does not contain any reference to email, although Mokolo and the other Cameroonians used this regularly.

Peter used email more than the other Cameroonians, and Ahmed's main channel of communication was Whatsapp, a cell phone-based instant messaging service.

The Cameroonians used their cell phones and the internet to call on others to help organize certain aspects of their economic lives. Aaron spent some time working as a 'hawker', selling goods to motorists in the centre of Cape Town. Often this occupation would necessitate a good knowledge of the weather, as well as the movements of police officers in the city. He kept up to date with this information with regular phone calls to fellow informal-sector businessmen.

While he worked part-time, Aaron was enrolled for a diploma in metalwork and welding at the College of Cape Town. As the section in box 3.3 indicates, Aaron drew on the technology provided by someone in his social network to attain the information he needed to enrol in the college.

***Box 3.3: Aaron's gaining of information through ICT***

I saw a Cameroonian brother, he told me that he would look into courses City of Cape Town Thornton campus for courses to do with engineering. He found a course on welding. I went there, to the campus, but it was break (vacation), so there was no one there. So I went online to see what courses they offered.

I: How did you find the website?

I went to the college, there on the signboard, you have the website. I came to the college, went back to (the area where he worked as a salesman in) Cape Town. I used one of my Cameroonian brothers' Blackberry's to go on line. But I could not get all the information, so when the college re-opened, I went back and got all the information. When we called the school number, it wasn't going through, but when we navigated on the website, we could see all the courses. Either we did ask, or we got the information for the date of school resume. I went there on that day and got all the course information.- Aaron, Interviewed 7 March 2012

Box 3.3 contains an excerpt that demonstrates the joining up of people along lines of necessity, creating a network that assists in overcoming challenges. Castells theorises networks as: “set(s) of interconnected nodes,” (Castells, 2000: 15), allowing the accomplishment of actions that might be beyond the capabilities of one person alone.

This is particularly evidenced by the process of ‘falling bush’ by young Cameroonians, and the coordinated efforts by many other people who facilitate this achievement.

Describing his arrival in Cape Town, Peter demonstrated the value of personal networks and connections when it came to leaving Cameroon: *I had my brother-in-law who came here first and then my sister followed him, as they were already married. My brother-in-law picked up a job with a tourism promoting company. Then they invited me to come to Cape Town for my education. They sent me money for my flight, travel insurance, and I stayed with them for the first few months after I arrived-* Peter, interviewed 30 June 2011.

Alpes (2011) and Tazanu (2012) have documented the processes of leaving Cameroon, pointing to the ways in which relatives of the person leaving may provide financial help which allows the young person to travel to another country. Peter’s story demonstrates the instrumental value of social networks in assisting aspiring migrants to leave Cameroon and to start their lives in a new country.

### **Global Hierarchies**

Gupta and Ferguson explained how the world is divided into hierarchically organized discontinuous spaces. Within this conceptualization, certain spaces are subservient to others in the global political economy. Perceived differences in power and influence also structure the patterns of solicitation of communication. The students with whom I worked referred to the fact that they were the object of a high volume of demands by acquaintances back in Cameroon who, they suspected, were seeking to build or solidify ties that could be used to their instrumental advantage.

Paul employed a creative screening strategy to avoid being contacted by these acquaintances. He did not share his number with people back in Cameroon, although they were able to contact his mother. His mother acted as his screening service, passing on the messages of those who had called her in the hope of contacting Paul. Paul could then either return or ignore the call at will.

I observed the people that I worked with drawing on ICT to solicit interactions from those who might provide social support or to share useful sources of social capital for immediate use or in the future. I found that often, while I was in the intensive fieldwork part of my study, the students to whom I had given my contact details, either in the form of a link to my Facebook profile, or my telephone number, would contact me ‘simply to say hi’, making contact with an initial salutation, after which conversation would drift into small talk.

The people with whom I worked reached out to people in their social networks to help them survive and succeed in a global political economy that has placed them at a disadvantage.

As I continued in my studies, I found that this balance of power was reversed towards the end of the writing-up period of my thesis, as I needed further input from the students, and would hail them with a personal message whenever I saw them online. Therefore I was the one who was reaching out, keeping the relationships alive for the instrumental help with my research as well as, in some cases, the social support to get me through.

### **Social capital and habitus**

If habitus, as Bourdieu argues, is a “system of structured, structuring dispositions... constituted in practice and always oriented towards practical functions” (Bourdieu, 1990: 52), the challenge and attraction of this research is in the necessity to observe young people as they move across different contexts, drawing on different aspects of habitus as they need, and variously drawing on social capital, as well as beginning to embody social capital themselves.

Castells has argued that the capacity of generating knowledge and the processing or managing of information which determines the productivity and competitiveness of all kinds of economic units (Castells 200:10), is linked to the degree to which individuals are familiar with the world of ICT, that is their habitus within that world. Therefore certain people have an advantage over others when it comes to using ICT for being productive and competitive in the global information-based economy.

This can be seen in the case of Mokolo, who had managed to secure a meeting with representatives from the multinational internet search engine, Google. Mokolo conceived of himself as a businessman and, ever since I met him in his first year of university, drew on every opportunity available to him to advance himself in the world of business and investment, particularly those related to technology. Mokolo was the treasurer of the Cape Town chapter of the Bakweri Cameroonian association, and used ICT to make contact with people who he thought might assist him in getting ahead. He identified resources such as electronic versions of investment textbooks to help him towards his dream of being an investor, through online forums and chat sites, and would use his well-developed habitus in the field of UCT to source these documents online. He had drawn up a business plan and, through his networks, had contacted the right people at Google, out of which had come a meeting to discuss his plans which, Mokolo hoped, would result in financial backing of his idea, or possibly a job with the company.

#### ***Box 3.4***

Facebook chat with Mokolo

28 February 2013

2:31pm

Mokolo

I am on my feet now (because) i need to go to joburg two weeks from now to present my project to google...i have developed it and google is interested in it

2:39pm

Jackson

Good luck with your presentation. I'm sure you will do brilliantly!

2:40pm

Mokolo

thank you

i real need this chance (because) my life can change from this trip

2:41pm

Jackson

I will be thinking of you. I know that you will succeed.

2:41pm

Mokolo

yeah

it is something they really need

Mokolo's story is an example of the ways in which he is entering into the global information market. Mokolo identified what he wants to do, and familiarised himself with the technology that he needs to do it, ensuring that he is able to use this technology to advance him in his career.

The people that I worked with used ICT for practical functions in the service of a friend or family member who was resident in Cameroon. The differential access to internet meant that individuals in South Africa were better able to download resources from the internet than their friends or family in Cameroon. Peter noted that he would access academic articles online for his brother to use towards his studies in engineering, as the internet connection to which his brother had access was too slow for downloading.

### **Becoming a source of social capital**

In the case of Mokolo, his interest in investment and his drive to achieve what he has internalized as a definition of success, exemplifies this need to become someone of consequence; to turn oneself into a person who is able, not only to look after oneself, but also to provide for others by adapting his habitus to change his previously ordained place in the local and global social hierarchy. Mokolo mentioned that those back home, “think you are doing well and they expect so much from you. Once you finish (studying) you must get a good job, you should help them as well.”

In his study of the appropriation of ICTs by Cameroonians to be “available and reachable” home and away, Tazanu uses the example of the mobile phone to illustrate the capacity of ICTs to “virtually contract distance by making people available and reachable through the personal identities shared with friends and family across borders” (Tazanu, 2012: 164).

The Vignette contained in Box 3.4 gives an example of this virtual contraction of distance, making those far away instantly available and reachable to others in their social networks.

#### ***Box 3.5***

I met Mokolo in the student union at UWC. He was sitting at a table by himself, busy on his laptop. I sat down next to him and noticed that he had a number of different windows open.

I watched and took notes while he flipped back and forth between business news websites and the social networking site, Facebook, on which he had chats with six different people running concurrently.

The first person with whom Mokolo was chatting was Pierre, a childhood friend living in Buea, Cameroon. Then a message appeared from Mokolo's cousin in America, who is married to an American who came to Cameroon to study at the University of Buea.

While waiting for these two contacts to respond, Mokolo flipped back to his profile on another social networking site, LinkedIn. LinkedIn is aimed at connecting people in their professional roles. According to Mokolo it is: “Like Facebook, but more advanced.” He uses LinkedIn to connect with many friends on campus, to talk about course work, to share information, or to arrange a rendezvous.

Mokolo also accessed the site [money.cnn.com](http://money.cnn.com), unsurprising as Mokolo is grooming himself to be a businessman.

Mokolo switched back to Facebook and began chatting to an artist friend of his sister's.

He was chatting simultaneously to a friend who had moved to Belgium to do his Master's in business management. They shared experiences of travelling, of being an outsider and of struggling in a new place. Mokolo turns away from the screen to tell me: “When I came to Cape Town, things weren't easy. I had to struggle,” He empathized with his friend and gave him support, while they were chatting on Facebook.

At this point, Mokolo had five chat windows open.

He then began to chat with his brother's girlfriend, before a chat window popped up, containing a greeting from Mokolo's cousin who was living in the Eastern Cape.

Mokolo switched back to money.cnn.com, where we read the news that Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple, had retired, before quickly changing back to Facebook to chat with the older brother of his best friend, who was staying in Korea.

This all took place within half an hour- *Field notes 25 August 2012*

This shows the simultaneous multiplicity of the communications and information-gathering that took place during a short period of time. Mokolo maintained an extensive social network, chatting to many different contacts simultaneously, while also using the internet to educate himself about finance and business news to supplement his studies.

Mokolo and his contacts hailed each other, using Facebook's messaging function, to reach out and to form and maintain networked links that might be drawn upon in the future.

### **Social support, Networks of caring**

Much of the existing literature on migration out of Cameroon focuses on the instrumental nature of social networks and the value of keeping these ties alive and well through the use of information and communication technology. There are numerous examples of jealousy, disgruntlement and failed expectations associated with a friend or family member's journey abroad (See Tazanu, 2012, Nyamnjoh, 2005).

There is less of a focus on ties of affection, pride and the bittersweet gratitude for the success of the absent member of the family in the literature on migration out of the country. Tazanu (2012: 201-204) presents the results of interviews with young people in Buea which highlight the interviewees' disenchantment with the behaviour of their bushfaller acquaintances. The people interviewed expressed their frustration that their acquaintances had not called them as much as they had hoped for (or indeed even at all) since they had left Cameroon. The young people interviewed by Tazanu attributed this neglect to a moral deficiency on the part of the bushfallers, and took it as a personal slight. However, in the case of my own study, Cameroonian students in Cape Town pointed out the difficulty of staying in touch with everyone, and admitted that they often felt persecuted by the demands of people back home.

For example: Peter noted that it is difficult when people in Cameroon think that he was only thinking about them when he called them, when actually, as he said: "You are thinking about them all the time." He asked: "So is it that they are not thinking about me that they don't call?"

According to Peter, this miscommunication often happens, even sometimes with family. He explained to me that it was expensive to call people in Cameroon. One option is to call from a phone booth operated privately in Maitland. The charge of calling Cameroon from a phone booth had recently been raised from R1.50 to R2. However, the cost of transport from Peter's apartment to this phone booth made the total cost of this call more expensive than using his cell phone, so Peter would pay R2.40 per minute to call from his cell phone, which was operated by MTN, a local network provider.

Cell-C, the network provider used by Peter's sister, charged R2 per minute to call Cameroon at the time of my fieldwork. When visiting his sister, Peter would insert her Cell-C sim card into his cell phone so that he could take advantage of the lower rates.

Talking about the expectation of people in Cameroon that the ones outside the country do the calling, Peter said: "The fact that from Cameroon they expect you to call has influenced us. Even though we complain that we have no money we always call. Is it that we are trying so hard to maintain the relationship?"

Despite their complaints about the difficulties associated with keeping in touch, communication with friends and family held great value for the students I worked with. Peter referred to these people as: "The people that help you to keep going" when he was struggling in South Africa, far away from home in Cameroon. When Aaron was between jobs at one stage, and struggling to find a course on which to enrol, Keisha and her husband called him to let him know that they were thinking about him and that he was not alone. There was a definite distinction between people who called to offer support and friendship, and those that would "only call when they needed something."

Tazanu, among others describes the "framework of tension where the 'real' or mutual interests in (transnational) ties are subtly substituted by the (home-bound) partners' personal ambitions and wishes." (Tazanu, 2012: 191, see also Nyamnjoh, 2005; Pelican, 2008). Although my research did support this statement to a certain extent, I also found that there was a large proportion of ties that were characterised by love and support rather than tension and opportunism.

In an interview conducted in Buea in January 2012, Peter's sister, Anna, explained the importance of being able to contact her brother:

**Box 3.6**

"When Peter was a baby he would not let me even go to school; he will always want to be around me, so for him to be far from me is like I have lost a part of myself. So when I get in touch with him so directly, I'm really overwhelmed, I'm happy. I know how he's faring, I know we can pray for him, he also joins us in prayer..."- Anna, interviewed January 2012.

Peter reiterated the importance that communication with his loved ones held for him: "I know I have people on who I can lean in times of problems. It makes you understand that you have people on who you can rely if you have difficulties...I found myself in a new environment... and my

relationships with those in Cameroon is to keep me going” - *Peter, interviewed 30 June 2011.*

### **Box 3.7**

“When I first came to South Africa, my first call with my father, I was thinking that I was not going to make life here, but I decided that I was going to make it work.

One time my father phoned me. He could tell from my voice that things were not ok. Things were not going well for me, but I didn’t want to worry him, so I was pretending that things were fine, but he said, “Don’t be ashamed, if things are not good, come home.”

My friends told me that to start life in a new country, you must first struggle.

I didn’t tell him the truth because then he would worry and feel bad.

When I was in a good position, I told him that things had not been going well. I told him that I did not speak to him at the time, because I didn’t want the family to worry” – *Ahmed, interviewed 15 February 2012.*

While acknowledging the struggle of making a life for himself in South Africa, Ahmed spoke of the importance of the support of his networks. In this way, ICT enables or facilitates emotional connection, reaffirming belonging despite the constraint of physical distance.

## **Reaching out**

### **Box 3.8**

I was sitting on the sofa in Aaron’s house in Maitland. He had sent me a text message on my cell phone, after a long silence of more than three weeks, saying that he had called “to break the silence,” and inviting me to visit him at his house.

Aaron met me at the gate of his new house, unlocking a padlock and sliding back the heavy bolt that secured it.

I entered the living room, my eyes taking in the television against one wall, with a poster of the Virgin Mary above and to the left of it. There was another man sitting on the sofa. He stood up as I came in, and Aaron introduced him to me as Thierry. I spoke to Thierry while Aaron was in the kitchen, and it turned out that Aaron had also called him up out of the blue and invited him round for dinner.

He also tells how Keisha called him, that he was feeling very depressed and she called.

Also the husband of Keisha called and that apparently lifted his spirits. He said that: “Just having

them call me, it galvanized something in me. Being an optimist is how you will have success in life.”

He replied: “When a person like that calls me, I feel so much happiness that I know that that person has me in mind. Especially when I’m depressed (spiritual).” He said: “words cannot express the mind”.

He said that: “When (a person calls) that person is always next to me. It feels like that person is right there next to me.”

He told me that there was a friend who called him from Joburg, and while they were talking, the battery ran down and she called again. He said: “When we had finished, I felt really, really relieved.” He said that: “It is like confirming that we are together”.

Aaron told me that “out of sight is not out of mind. We may not see each other for a while. It is distance. (We) haven’t seen each other for a long while, we call and I at times call her, and you see the belongingness, it really exists. When you go to these gatherings, it shows how distant you were and how happy you are to see yourself.” - *Aaron, interviewed 13 December 2013.*

I note at this point that, as I mentioned earlier, Aaron is going through a tough time, it seems to me that now is the time that he is reaching out to people, by calling and texting them. He texted me out of the blue just to “break the silence”, and it seems as if he did the same with Thierry and Keisha. While we are busy talking, Keisha calls Aaron and they talk for a while about Aaron’ worries regarding his job and life in general.

### **Conclusion:**

In this chapter I have introduced the concept of social capital, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu, and examined this in the context of global hierarchies of inequality. I have provided an example of this inequality as it is enacted by the South African Department of Home Affairs to restrict and discipline the movement of non-South Africans in the country. I have demonstrated some of the ways in which the Cameroonians in my study used ICT to mobilize social capital thorough their networks, as well as how they use certain functions of ICT to avoid being targeted by others as sources of social capital. I have noted that the degree to which the Cameroonians could draw on ICT to mobilize social capital, was a function of their familiarity with the technology, that is the degree to which they had assimilated it as part of their habitus, or way of being in the world. I have presented an example of one of the Cameroonians maintaining his network of contacts through the ‘chat’ function of Facebook. Finally, I have emphasised the value of supportive communication between family and friends, acknowledging the place of love and support in transnational communications.

In chapter four I will deal with themes of gifting, reciprocity and obligation in the context of the Cameroonians’ migration to South Africa and their ICT-mediated communication. I will further explore the concept and practice of ‘bushfalling’, and the perceived responsibilities that Cameroonian bushfallers bear in relation to their family, friends and acquaintances. I will

deal with the giving of cell phones, physical artefacts of communication, as gifts. I will discuss the value of communication, along with the negative value of unwanted communications. I have suggested that methods of communication such as phone calls and text messages can be seen as artefacts of exchange, and I go on to analyse these in terms of theories of exchange, including discussing what happens when these norms of reciprocity break down.

## Chapter 4

### **Gifting, reciprocity and obligation in communication by young Cameroonians in Cape Town.**

#### **Introduction**

Gifting, reciprocity and obligation are central themes in the literature on migration from Cameroon (Alpes, 2011; de Bruijn, 2006; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Tazanu, 2012 ). Much of this literature is focussed on material remittances and the obligation of bushfallers to support those back home financially and materially, and I consider this aspect, before going on to discuss other ways in which gifting, reciprocity and obligation may play out in the context of migration of students from Cameroon to South Africa. I examine the perceived breakdown in norms of reciprocity, as well as the power and status derived by bushfallers from their ability to assert their success in the bushfalling venture when they make contact with those at home.

The practice of gift-giving has been theorized to increase social cohesion and to strengthen interpersonal bonds through the norms of reciprocity that govern the nature of these exchanges (Mauss, 1954). However, in the context of power imbalances, the norm of reciprocity may break down. Tazanu noted that: “In the age of new media, although contacts are shared, there are however non-reciprocal obligations as the ties are left at the mercy of migrants” (Tazanu, 2012: 261), pointing to an imbalance in expectations of reciprocity and differences in perceived responsibility and obligations.

Fleischer argued that once abroad, “The individual is part of an informal reciprocal system of exchange, which is based on trust, has social consequences, and includes duties and responsibilities for both sides” (Fleischer, 2007: 1). Themes of gifting, reciprocity and obligation emerged strongly in my own fieldwork, and I will draw on the work of Fleischer, among others, to think through my observations.

The young Cameroonians used information and communication technology to form and maintain social links. This exchange may take the form of simply calling or texting to keep in touch, or it may manifest through the giving and receiving of phone calls and text messages as artefacts of exchange, going beyond their communicative content to cultivate feelings of belonging through acts of gifting.

#### **Bushfalling, obligations and young Cameroonians' communication relationships**

Communication interactions take place on an interpersonal level. However, in the case of the young Cameroonians in this study, they were shaped and structured by the macro-economic context of migration and marginalization, within which they live, as well as by social factors such as closeness of relationships and the individuals' place in the family and the community.

They were understood by their communities as well as by themselves to be bushfallers and were expected to be willing and able to provide for their families and communities back in Cameroon. In certain cases, families mobilise resources or assist the young man or woman to

go abroad precisely with this understanding (Nyamnjoh 2005, 2007, 2011, Alpes 2011, Tazanu 2012, Frei 2013). This was repeatedly evident in my conversations and interviews with those I worked with. Mokolo, for example, explained his understanding of the concept:

I: What do you understand by the term 'bushfaller'?

M: That refers to the fact that Cameroonians have to go out of the country to search for greener pastures, and that these greener pastures are called “bush”.

I: Why do you call it 'bush'?

M: Because when a hunter is going to the bush, he is expected to bring back bounty, like meat, and that is like how the bushfallers are expected to bring back stuff from greener pastures.- *Mokolo, interviewed 25 August 2012.*

The practice of bushfalling is “an aggressive search for salvation” (Nyamnjoh, 2011:706) in the face of economic stagnation and unemployment in Cameroon. Bushfallers are forced into infidelity in relation to their own country in the search for economic freedom. Bushfallers straddle the edge of belonging and not belonging and are simultaneously required and despised by those back home. They are “a present absence and an absent presence” (Nyamnjoh, 2011: 707) and embody the link between the metropolitan centres to which they migrate and their home towns on the margins as they trade material assistance for recognition in their home communities.

The assumption that bushfallers will provide for their friends and extended family still in Cameroon, is based on the idea that since bushfallers are lucky enough to have made it out of the country and on to “greener pastures”, they then have an obligation to help those who were not fortunate enough to be able to leave the country, and who may (or may not) have helped them to achieve their bushfaller status ((Alpes, 2011; de Bruijn, 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Tazanu, 2012).). An excerpt from an interview illustrates the way in which this obligation is felt by Aaron:

“It is important to always think back home. We are where we are today because of our relations and communities. My flight to Cape Town, my aunt paid for that.”- *Aaron, interviewed 23 June 2011.*

Cameroon was ranked ninth in the top ten recipients of remittances in the World Bank Migration and Remittance Factbook 2011, with emigrants remitting \$148 million in 2010 (World Bank 2011). Through my fieldwork it became apparent that, although students may be even less able to spare money to send back to Cameroon than those working abroad, they were notified frequently through phone calls, emails and text messages that they were expected to remit as much as if they had been earning a full salary.

According to Tazanu: “...migrants acknowledged that it is their moral obligation to support certain non-migrants” (2012: 201). Interviews with young Cameroonians living in Cape Town suggested that this obligation applied to students, and that they were not in fact exempt from this obligation for the duration of their studies. An excerpt from an interview with

Ahmed highlighted the way in which obligation to support their families is felt by young Cameroonians living abroad.

I: So I remember that you are the oldest among your siblings, so it is your responsibility to look after the younger ones?

A: Yes, well my father doesn't mind, but if I don't do it, I will be ashamed. I must be like a man and look after my family. I will do it for me. I know that if I look after my parents properly, when I go back home, everybody will be happy to see me. If I don't do it, people will look at me and say that "oh, you were just having your money and now you are back."- *Ahmed, interviewed 15 February 2012.*

The interview points, not only to the obligation felt by the bushfallers abroad, but also to their awareness of the threat of disapproval by people in their home communities, should they fail to support their families. Ahmed vocalises the shame that he would feel if he did not support his siblings, pointing to a strong perception of obligation to do so.

We have many mothers and fathers and an extended family of 'brothers and sisters' who might be our cousins or not even related to us. If I am sending something home, it is like I must send something to everyone in the extended family. It is even killing us! There is too much responsibility. - *Aaron, interviewed 23 June 2011.*

This feeling of "too much responsibility" is a common theme in the literature on Cameroonian bushfalling (Alpes, 2011; Tazanu, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2005). It seems as if there is no limit to the obligation expected of and felt by bushfallers.

### **Reaching out**

Although they may be worse off economically than they were had they remained in Cameroon, Cameroonians who live outside of the country may be seen by those back home as being affluent and therefore able to afford things that those back home cannot. One way in which this manifests is in terms of differential expectations in terms of who bears the cost of calling and texting, as well as who is expected to take the initiative to make contact.

The young Cameroonian students in Cape Town expressed frustration at the fact that they were seen as well-off bushfallers, and therefore that they were expected to bear the cost of communication. However, another interview suggested that the young bushfallers may be complicit in what some of them saw as an inconvenient misconception.

Maurice, a friend of Mokolo's gave the example of Cameroonians sleeping on the floor in each other's houses, as they don't have money for rent. "There are many things that we do here that we can't explain," he said. He continued to explain how Cameroonians who come to South Africa maintained a silence about their lives there, in that they did not divulge the reality of their living conditions to those back home. I asked why this was and Maurice explained that: "When you are here it is like your life is open already, (people back home)

think that you are living the good life. Because when you go home you are like God.” He said, poignantly: “If you want to know what it is like, buy your aircraft ticket and then shut your mouth.”- *Maurice, interviewed 5 July 2011.*

This adds a different dimension to the views expressed by the other people I interviewed. In contrast to this situation in which the norm of reciprocity is observed, even at a large cost to the person expected to bear the responsibility to reciprocate, this was not the case in terms of communication between students in Cape Town and their family and friends back in Cameroon. Young Cameroonians reported that those who were regarded as bushfallers, were often expected to be the ones to call, regardless of whether or not they could realistically afford to do so. Whereas most of the Cameroonians tried hard to convince their friends and family back home that they were not as well off as people at home believed, this example points to a different view of the situation. Not only is there a belief perpetuated in Cameroon that those overseas are living the good life, but in this case it seems that some of those Cameroonians living outside of the country do nothing to disabuse them of this notion and, indeed, go to lengths to conceal their hardship and harsh living conditions from those back home. From accounts like the one above, it appears that leaving Cameroon is a rite of passage or an entrance into a secret society and only once you have taken the plunge, will you know what life is like on the other side.

The above section details the responsibility, real or perceived that Cameroonian bushfallers bear in relation to their families, friends and acquaintances. I will go on to explore the ways in which these responsibilities play out in the context of transnational communication relationships.

### **Giving the gift of communication**

The need to communicate can also necessitate the giving of physical gifts.

On one occasion, Peter had bought a cell phone for his mother. His mother had been sick with a kidney problem, and Peter wanted to speak to her regularly, as he was concerned about her health. One of his acquaintances was planning to travel to Cameroon the following day, and Peter asked this person to take the cell phone with him. This provides an example of the way in which the capabilities of new ICT can be drawn upon to provide a link between people who are far apart from one another. However, in Peter's case, these capabilities required an investment before he could draw on them for his own and his mother's benefit. Also, it was necessary for Peter to strategize cleverly to ensure that his gift would not end up being diverted by his nieces and nephews for their own use.

### **The moral framework of communication, remittances and gifting**

Having introduced the idea of reciprocity and obligation in relation to the expected material and financial gifts from bushfallers to those remaining in Cameroon, I draw on Mauss's theory of gifting and reciprocity to better understand this relationship.

Mauss (1954) challenged the accepted doctrine of Utilitarian market economics, which assumed that the essential motivation for all human action was the maximization of pleasure, comforts and material possessions through the mechanisms of the so-called free market.

Instead of accepting this theory, which dehumanised social interactions by imposing an abstracted monetary value on the goods exchanged, Mauss proposed that exchanges took the form of gift-giving, without calculating exactly what had been given to whom and how much the gift was worth.

Graeber examined the way in which the receipt of a gift entailed the obligation to return it in kind to the extent that “...the recipient of generosity often feels somehow reduced if he or she cannot (reciprocate)” (Graeber, 2000).

Tazanu writes about the “moral framework” guiding the discourse and practices around remittances, gifts and obligations in the context of bushfalling in Buea, Cameroon (Tazanu, 2012: 206). Tazanu supports Mauss and Graeber in recognizing that the act of giving is intimately connected to the obligation to reciprocate. The following vignette provides an example of this keenly felt obligation.

Mokolo, a first-year student at The University of the Western Cape (UWC) found one of his old school friends on Facebook, and they exchanged phone numbers. This friend was working at the time for PriceWaterhouseCoopers in Dubai. Therefore, for him, the cost of a phone call to South Africa was negligible, and he called Mokolo a few weeks prior to the recounting of the story. However, following this phone call, Mokolo went out and bought R40 worth of airtime that would then allow him to return the call. When I asked him how he could afford to spend this amount on a phone call, Mokolo responded: “I saw it as a challenge”.

Rather than defaulting on the obligation to reciprocate, Mokolo spent money that he could not really afford on a conversation that might be deemed by some to be unnecessary.

### **The value of communication**

The objects involved in an exchange relation all become personally charged (Mauss, 1954). What matters in the exchange relationship are the relations between the people involved, rather than viewing objects and accumulation as the central factors. When analysing gifting, reciprocity and obligation in the context of communication acts in transnational relationships, the 'objects' changing hands are personally charged by definition.

Interpersonal communication has an intrinsic value. It has appeared throughout my fieldwork as an invaluable source of connection, and a priceless confirmation of belonging in what, to the young Cameroonians in this study, are often unfriendly, alienating or even hostile social circumstances. A call, text message or email is in the first instance, a message from one person to another, carrying psychological value for the giver (the opportunity to narrate their life in their new place) and the receiver (the privilege of hearing about this life).

Mauss emphasised the “pleasure” and “joy” of giving, arguing that the whole point of the gift is that it furthers both giver and recipient at the same time (Mauss, 1954). This is emphasized in many transnational communication interactions when both giver and receiver benefit from the exchange. Communication is important in keeping friendships alive (de Bruijn, 2009: 183).

### **The negative value of 'unwanted' communications**

However, it is not always the case that communications from Cameroon bring the joy and pleasure that Mauss wrote about, as many of the calls and text messages received by Cameroonians living in Cape Town contain unwelcome requests for financial or material assistance, and therefore do not conform to this definition, but rather assume a prior (possibly imagined) obligation and demand its repayment. These unwanted texts and phone calls can be avoided to a certain extent by creatively utilizing the technical functions of cell phones and email to sidestep the obligation to reciprocate phone calls and text messages (Powell, 2012; Tazanu, 2012).

Peter related the way in which his supervisor at UWC used the “turnoffability” of his cell phone to resist the way that this technology obliges people to be always available. Peter’s supervisor turns off his cell phone when he doesn’t want to be disturbed and turns it on again when he is ready to receive a phone call. Powell describes a similar practice in ‘Me and my cell phone,’ where the capabilities of the phone are manipulated by the user to avoid unwelcome communications and to resist the social obligations entailed by always being reachable (Powell, 2012: 15)

Paul had an the aversion to returning phone calls that he blamed on the fact that these calls were often to request favours, money or assistance in migrating to South Africa.

#### ***Box 4.1***

We were at the flat in Maitland, which was my main field site. Paul's cell phone rang in his hand where he had been holding it, showing me the numbers saved in his address book. He glanced down at the screen, where the message 'private number' was displayed. He pressed the button at the top right of the key pad, just underneath the screen display to reject the call. I looked up at him, waiting for an explanation.

“I will never call back on a no-number. It might be a person asking for a favour or to come and visit.”

“Who might be calling?” I asked.

“It could be cousins, aunts, nieces, or maybe friends as well.”

“So what makes you not want to call back?”

Paul said: “It is to do with mind-set of people back in Cameroon, that those overseas are living well, and that they are better off than those back home. Calls from Cameroon will be asking for a visit, a favour, or help of some kind. The mind-set of people back home has made us not want to be bothered by people back home.”- *Paul, interviewed 2 July 2011.*

The vignette in box 4.1 supports previous work on Cameroonian transnational sociality (Tazanu, 2012), suggesting that the potential of constant connectivity provided by communication technology can have negative, as well as positive, consequences.

## Communication acts as gifts

In 'The Gift,' Mauss intimates that objects are imbued with meaning, so much so that they take on lives and personalities of their own (Mauss, 1954). However, communication tools such as text messages and phone calls are of necessity impermanent, which should preclude them from taking on this meaning. But often favourite text messages are hoarded, rather than being deleted. This suggests the intrinsic value of these messages as objects symbolic of the feelings of the sender towards the receiver and the relationship between sender and receiver.

Similarly, text messages containing generic festive greetings, or religious meaning, can be passed around as objects. I came across one text message as I was going through Aaron's cell phone inbox with him. It was a general Christmas greeting, wishing blessings for the recipient. It was July - nowhere near Christmas - when I found the message, and when I asked Aaron about it, he told me that he was saving the message to send out to his contacts the following year. This is an example of how a form of communication that was designed to be a means of short, quick connection, is invested with meaning by the person using it and transformed into an artefact of value, rather than simply serving a communicative purpose.

Taylor and Harper, in their paper on cell phone mediated gifting among British teenagers, argued that text messages and voice calls, as well as other communicative acts are gifts, in as far as they have value, that this value is connected with the giver, the recipient and the context in which the exchange takes place (Taylor & Harper, 2002). This conception of communication as gifting allows for an analysis of transnational communication between bushfallers and those in their communities that takes into account the expectations, pressure and obligations tied up in the acts of communicating with people back home.

Understanding phone calls and text messages as gifts, over and above their communicative function, stems from the value that they carry for those who send and receive them. Throughout my fieldwork so far, there has been a theme emerging of “just calling to say hi”, to “check how they are doing”, or for instance “to wish (someone) happy Sunday”. These communications, although they carry semantic meaning, also have value simply through the fact of their exchange. The content, although meaningful, is essentially transferable, and the value lies in the fact of the gift, and the act of the giving, rather than in what the words signify. The following excerpt from an interview with Peter illustrates this point:

“For me when I am sitting here, when someone from Cameroon sends me a text or a phone call, I realise someone still thinks about me, makes you feel like you belong, like someone cares about you. That you are not someone who has just been thrown away, far from home’.- Peter, interviewed 7 December 2011.

The idea that the act of giving contains within it an obligation to reciprocate is embodied in Cameroonian politics, as well as everyday sociality and economic transactions. Mutual assistance and reciprocity may take the form of the exchange of political support for favourable appointments (Nkwi, 2006; Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997), as well as *njangi*, or communal savings groups (Fonchingong, 2005). However, the discourses and beliefs around the superior financial and social status of bushfallers can result in a breakdown in these

relationships of reciprocity, in that the students with whom I worked were often expected to be the ones to call or text if they wanted to hear from people in Cameroon. It was interesting to note that this breakdown in reciprocity occurred most frequently with friends and acquaintances, whereas close family members did in fact do their share of calling.

### **The breakdown in reciprocity**

This perceived breakdown in reciprocity, as well as being vexing for the students living in Cape Town, also had consequences. For instance, there was the risk of missing important news, such as sickness in the family, as people back home would wait for someone from outside of the country to call, before informing them of the news, which they would then relay to the person concerned. Interviews with the young people with whom I worked told of communication of important information being relayed to family members via people outside of the country.

Peter had called his friend's house in Cameroon, and had heard from his friend's younger sister that their mother had fallen ill. The sister had not called her brother to inform him, as she had been waiting for him to call the house. Peter was the one to call his friend and tell him about his mother's state of ill health, even though he was calling from outside of the country. He said:

“People in Cameroon think that people overseas have a lot of money - even though it is cheaper to call from Cameroon to South Africa than from South Africa to Cameroon, people in Cameroon will wait for those outside to call them.”- *Peter, interviewed 7 December 2011.*

This example represents what is seen as a breakdown in the norm of reciprocity. The students with whom I worked in Cape Town were expected by their connections in Cameroon to purchase airtime and bear the responsibility of keeping in contact. Even in the extreme circumstances, this responsibility is not reciprocated and communication and reciprocity breaks down.

However, it is important that we situate these communications within the context in which they take place and examine them, not simply from the perspective of the exasperated 'bushfallers', but also take into account the social and economic situation that provides the context for this exchange.

The discourse around bushfalling constructs those who have left Cameroon as more fortunate and wealthier than those who have stayed behind. Although this does not always translate into requests for remittances from people back home (Tazanu, 2012: 215), during my time in the field, I observed a subtle resistance taking place, with non-migrant friends of the students I worked with, ensuring that it was the one in South Africa who would be doing the calling.

This pattern of accepting calls from bushfallers abroad and even going to great lengths to avoid reciprocating these communicative offerings, were structured according to the closeness of the relationship between the two people involved, as well as by their relative economic power. While Peter experienced non-reciprocation of calls and avoidance of

responsibility in communication with his friends and acquaintances, calls from his family were regular and appropriately reciprocated.

Similarly related to the obligation to reciprocate is the guilt felt by those who may be unable to respond to communication by others. Peter explained that he decided to remain invisible while on chat on his phone, which was due to the fact that his phone did not have the internet speed to be able to sustain multiple conversations at one time. As he put it: “If I go online and like seven people want to chat with me, I can’t really respond.”– *Peter, interviewed 30 March 2012.*

This statement reveals a desire and obligation to respond to communication from others, an obligation that is sufficiently strong that Peter chose to remain invisible, rather than be placed in a situation where people could recognise his availability to communicate via *chat*, thus demanding a response that he was not able to give.

### **Embodiment of responsibility**

Mauss (1973), Bourdieu (1977) and Warnier (2009) argued that the material culture that we experience in our daily lives, shapes our bodily practices, essentially acting on us as we act on it. This process is so much a part of us and our identities that it is invisible to us and difficult to analyse.

The entanglement of my own identity with those of the people whose practices I was trying to analyse made this a particularly challenging part of my analysis, as the practices that I was writing about were practices that I also used, and therefore they were invisible to me as well as to the young Cameroonians with whom I worked.

Living away from home, the physical things associated with ICT became the material culture through which the links between the young Cameroonians, their friends and particularly their families back home were enacted and drawn upon. As I worked with them over the course of my research, I was able to observe the ways in which they grew to embody, not only the technology that they used, but also the expectations and responsibilities that reached out to them from their homes.

While the inability to reciprocate communication acts or fulfil perceived obligations may bring negative feelings, fulfilling obligations provides the opportunity to demonstrate responsibility and confers status and power upon those able to do so. Peter had read and given his comments on a paper that I had written for the annual conference of Anthropology Southern Africa (ASnA) in Stellenbosch in 2011, on gifting, value and reciprocity that formed the basis for a section of this chapter. He had advised me that it seemed as if I was trying to say that there was a breakdown in reciprocity, that the gifting went one way in that Cameroonians in Cape Town would complain that they would be the ones to spend money and effort on airtime, while those 'back home' in Cameroon would not reciprocate. However, Peter pointed out that although it may seem like there was a disparity in reciprocity, the bushfallers would in fact gain status from these phone calls and text messages, both simply from the fact that they were in a different country, but also through the way in which they were now able to interact within their families and communities from across the globe. Peter's

status as a bushfaller allowed him to converse with people in ways that would otherwise be unavailable to him. For instance, he cited the example whereby he spoke to the mother of a friend of his concerning the friend's older brother. Now, if he were back in Cameroon, said Peter, he would never have considered giving advice to his friend's older brother, as his status did not allow that. However, the fact that he was calling from South Africa, and therefore had 'fallen bush', lent credibility to the advice that he gave his friend's older brother and, in fact was the critical factor that allowed this advice-giving to take place.

Therefore, it seems that ICTs not only enable communication across great distances, but also Peter's story provides an instance whereby ICTs enable the higher status gained by bushfallers to be recognised in their communities back home.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined the ways in which gifting, reciprocity and obligation manifest in the relationships between young Cameroonians living in Cape Town and their families, friends and acquaintances still living in Cameroon. I have argued that the complexities of bushfalling bring a set of considerations to bear on these relationships, resulting in an imbalance of perceptions of obligation, which then impacts on the acts of reciprocity in the relationships. I have explored the moral framework of communication, remittances and gifting, drawing on the ideas of Mauss to explain the idea of the gift as intimately entangled with the obligation to reciprocate. I have presented an analysis of communication acts such as phone calls, emails, and text messages as acts of gift-giving, and explored the consequences of the inability to meet the obligations entailed within the communicative relationship. Finally I have argued that in embodying their responsibilities and obligations, the young Cameroonians were able to enact their success as bushfallers through using communication technology to demonstrate status and power in their communities.

In chapter three I demonstrated the ways in which the Cameroonians in my study negotiate becoming a source of social capital for themselves and certain people in their social networks, while also avoiding being approached as such by certain others. In chapter four, I extended this to argue that they enacted their success in their bushfalling ventures by using ICT to demonstrate status and power in their communities. In chapter five, I will build on these findings to demonstrate how the Cameroonians in my study use Facebook to enact and broadcast these aspects of their identities.

## Chapter 5

### Facebook and the visual construction of identity by Cameroonian students in Cape Town

#### Introduction

In this chapter I start with a brief introduction to the structure of the social networking site, *Facebook*, at the time of my research. I do this to help the reader understand the framework within which the young Cameroonians in Cape Town used the site between 2011 and 2013, as Facebook is constantly updated and even within my research period, design and functionality of the site had shifted slightly.

One aspect of the young Cameroonians' use of Facebook was to continue and extend their interaction with photographs as a visual archive and also as a medium through which they could co-construct their identities with family, friends and acquaintances. I have selected this one aspect (among many) of their use of Facebook to argue that the act of posting photographs, and the commentary that this elicits constitutes a process of active meaning-making around identity, both individual and collective. I explore the visual as a source of data, while also taking into account the relationship between people and photographs, as well as the ways in which relationships between people were realised through these photographs, inside and outside of the medium of Facebook. Through observations of activities on Facebook, I argue that the people with whom I worked were not only constructing a public narrative of themselves and their current identities, but were also writing (and illustrating) their own future, as they constructed themselves not only as they were but also as they wanted to become.

I draw on the images posted on the Facebook profiles of two of the young Cameroonians in this study, analysing both the photographs themselves, as well as the interaction provoked by their publication on the site.

#### Introducing Facebook

Each Facebook profile page consists of multiple elements. At the top of the page is a 'cover picture,' taking up the entire width of the screen. This picture is chosen by each individual for their own home page and could be either a photograph taken by themselves or someone else, or an image downloaded from the internet.

At the bottom left corner of the cover picture is the individual's 'profile picture'. This is the image that is used as a representation of that person in all their interactions on Facebook. It is chosen by the individual, and is usually a picture of that person, although this is not always the case. Often individuals will choose a picture that is representative of, but not necessarily a picture of, themselves.

Both the cover photo and the profile picture can be changed at any time. Most Facebook users will keep each image for a number of months before changing it. These images represent the user when others visit their profiles, and in all their interactions on the site.

To the right of the profile picture is the individual's Facebook name. Again, this is most often their real name, although users will occasionally adopt a different name for use on Facebook. On the far right side of the page are buttons with the functionality to: message, connect to another individual's profile using the 'friend' function, or video call the person whose profile is being viewed. The final button on the far right contains a drop-down menu that allows for further actions, such as introducing people by 'suggesting a friend', or 'unfriending' or 'blocking' that person.

Directly below the profile picture is a list of personal information about the individual. This section can contain the person's date of birth, their employment details, their education history, and their 'hometown' and current residence. There is also the option to display 'relationship status.' The owner of each page has control over which information is displayed on his/her profile. Further information can be accessed by clicking the word 'about' below this information.

To the right of the personal information, there are a number of squares with images contained within them. Each square represents an aspect of the person's Facebook 'life'. Clicking on the first square will take the viewer to a list of that person's 'friends', the next square gives the viewer access to their photographs, while subsequent squares allow access to pages with which the page owner has aligned themselves through 'likes'. The contents of these boxes are replicated to the right of the 'timeline' described below.

All of the above information and graphics are contained within a box with a white background and a light blue border. From the bottom of this box, a straight line, of the same light blue as the border, stretches down towards the bottom of the page. This is known as the 'timeline'. At intervals on the timeline, there are smaller boxes, containing 'posts'. Posts can take the form of text, images, or video. These can be original text (often a communication of what the individual is feeling at a given moment), photos taken by the owner of the profile or someone they know, or they could be items 'reposted' from someone else's timeline. The posts on the timeline represent what the owner of the profile wants to communicate to those with whom he or she is 'Facebook friends'. These people can react to the items posted by leaving a comment that appears in the box directly underneath the item posted on the timeline.

According to Miller, "Facebook is a virtual place where you can discover who you are by seeing a visible objectification of yourself" (Miller, 2011: 179) However, following Mbembe (1997), I recognise that, in melding the physical and its reflection (that which is hidden but not completely absent), it is also a very real space. I argue that this objectification is a result both of careful construction by an individual and the less orchestrated interaction with others on the site.

The people in this study constructed an image of themselves as they would like to be seen, but also as they would like to become. Chalfen recognised that the members of the Japanese-American families whose family photograph albums he analysed used their production and selection of photographs to reinforce statements of belonging (Chalfen, 1991: 199). The

young people with whom I worked used their Facebook photographs to align themselves with various groups, belief structures and ways of life, presenting themselves, not only as they are and as they wish others to see them, but also aspirationally, as they wish to become.

In the following section, I discuss the use of visual methods in anthropology. I focus on the ambiguity of images, noting that while this presents analytical challenges, it also allows images to be used strategically to represent and construct identity.

### **The thing and its double<sup>1</sup>: Visual representation in anthropology**

The use of visual methods in anthropology has been criticised for ambiguity and lack of explicit reflexivity. However, proponents of visual methods of data collection- particularly those of observational cinema- claimed that these methods lack the bias of observations written up as field notes by an anthropologist (Jaknis, 1988: 172), lauding these methods as able to capture the 'truth' of a social situation, the data untainted by mediation through the researcher as an inherently flawed research instrument.

However, photographs and film are biased in the same way as a text written by an author; possibly even more dangerously, as visual data is often passed off as 'proof', somehow avoiding questions as to its validity and allowing space for conscious (mis)representation and active construction of 'truth' and identity. As Worth argued: “(visual data) is not a copy of the world out there, but someone's statement about the world” (Worth, 1980, in Jaknis, 1988:172).

Mbembe has commented on the attributes of images that allow them to mime 'things', saying that: “in the very act of representation, (the copy masks) its own arbitrariness, its own potential for opacity, simulacrum and distortion” (Mbembe, 1997: 151).

For the purposes of this study, it is this very attribute that allows photographs to present complex nuances and nuanced complexities of what might be called a social truth. Mbembe has suggested that images are in themselves “figures of speech” and that they can be used as “a particular strategy of persuasion” (Mbembe, 1997: 152). I examine the ways in which the young Cameroonians used the visual aspects of their Facebook accounts to persuade the viewers that they were people of consequence, that is: sources of social capital in their society.

There are intricate interconnections between the so-called real and virtual, woven together in a complex reality that reunites the physical and the metaphysical (that which is only representationally or virtually present) in the lives of those who move. Powell (2012: 11) presents a detailed description of the complex relationships that she had with two different phones she owned. She allows the reader an insight into the way in which the cell phone makes digital presence real for some migrant people.

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<sup>1</sup> I gratefully acknowledge Achille Mbembe for the title of this chapter

## **Facebook as space and practice**

Adone Kitching, in her honours thesis entitled: 'Navigating the frontier: Facebook and the Negotiation of reality,' argued for the importance of situating the analysis of Facebook within the context of people's lives as a whole, as opposed to attempting to analyse 'online' space as separate from 'offline' space (Kitching, 2011: 2). While I have analysed the photographs selected by individuals and presented on Facebook, I have also paid attention to the choices behind the choice of images to place in the public space of Facebook, as well as the interactions that these choices provoke. In this way, I have tried to situate my analysis of the Cameroonians' use of Facebook within the context of their lives as a whole.

Facebook can be seen as both an archive and a space of interaction. Items posted onto the site are stored, frozen in history, like the pages of an almanac in a library. However, on Facebook, there is the possibility of constantly commenting on this archived material, allowing for interaction to take place between users, making it also a space of socialization.

Thus, Facebook allows not only the storage and organization of photographs, but also acts as a place where the young Cameroonians could interact with others in their community, using the photos as a point of reference. In this way, Facebook is turned into a social space rather than an album or photographic archive.

Doing research on Facebook represents the entanglement of ethnographic observation and historical research. The research is ethnographic in that it entails the observation of interactions between people, while being historical in that these interactions are preserved in what is essentially an archival document.

Smith (2011) also points to the value of photographs for eliciting data and, noting that photographs can be a basis for discussion, prompting verbal data that may otherwise not have emerged. In this way, the photographs posted by the young Cameroonians on their Facebook profiles elicited online discussion in the form of comments relating to the photographs and organised underneath the image on the site.

Facebook is "at least as often the complement to offline lives as the expression of offline lives" (Miller, 2011: 174). For the people I worked with, photographs were an important means of communicating on Facebook as well as off it. Photographs lined the walls of their rooms, were stuck to mirrors and attached by magnets to refrigerators. Occasionally, during fieldwork, the person I had been talking to would get up from the sofa and leave the room, returning with a pile of loose photographs, which they would proceed to sift through until they found the one that would prove their point. This is illustrated in vignette in Box 5.1.

### ***Box 5.1***

Aaron goes into his room, and gets a bunch of photographs, from black and white pictures of his grandmother and a young uncle, to pictures of himself as a boy, to recent pictures of family members leaving Cameroon for America. The photographs make a thick pile, about 15 centimetres high, some in envelopes, some longer than others and poking out of the sides,

some much smaller, getting lost among the others.

Aaron starts to explain to me the meaning behind the photographs: "...you can see from the way that (My brother-in-law) dresses, that he commands authority..." taking each photo in turn from the pile to comment on before returning it to its place in this informal archive.

Box 5.1 contains just one example of how physical, printed photos were present in the lives of Aaron and the others who helped me in my research. I argue that this relationship with photographs, as an important indicator of belonging and identity, has extended to the posting of and commenting on photographs on Facebook.

All the young Cameroonians involved in this study were registered as users on Facebook. Each person had a profile page onto which they uploaded items such as images or text, including photographs of themselves and others. They interacted with friends, family and acquaintances through 'comments' left in response to these uploaded items.

### **Building oneself on Facebook: The cases of Mokolo and Paul**

In the analysis to follow, I present the cases of Mokolo and Paul. At the time of my fieldwork, Mokolo was a student in his junior years at the University of the Western Cape. He was majoring in Finance, and he took great pains to construct himself as a successful businessman. In speaking about himself, as well as through his actions, including doing extra reading about self-improvement, business strategy and investment, he oriented himself towards his chosen future of financial and social success. Paul had been a Baptist pastor in Cameroon. When I met him in Cape Town, he spoke of his status in his community as a moral and religious leader to the extent that he had to guard his phone number closely to avoid a multitude of admirers calling him in his private time. I didn't see any evidence of this popularity during the time I spent with Paul in Cape Town. It was only by observing his interactions on Facebook that I realised the credibility of his claims.

I use Bray's definition of "Identity as the way or ways in which a person is, or wishes to be known by others" (Bray, 2006: 24). As such, identity is not fixed, but rather constantly in flux. It is negotiated and re-negotiated throughout life. In the paragraphs that follow, I investigate the ways that identity is constructed, negotiated and reinforced by individuals on Facebook.

Miller notes that "Facebook gives us a moral encompassment within which we have a sense not only of who we are, but of who we ought to be" (Miller, 2011: 180). Here, Miller is suggesting that we construct ourselves as we think that others wish to see us. In the two cases that I chose for analysis, aspects of identity emerged such as: world traveller, religious leader, successful businessman, and 'proper' Cameroonian man.

Kitching argues that the first-year undergraduate students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) with whom she worked inhabited a "negotiated reality" (Kitching, 2011: 2), a hybrid amalgamation of ways of being-in-the-world that represented a synthesis between the false dichotomy of 'online' and 'offline' existence. She observed that the students she worked with

drew on the fluidity allowed by Facebook to perform and negotiate their identity in this public space (Kitching, 2011: 25).

I argue that the young Cameroonians I worked with used Facebook in a similar way, but go beyond the argument put forward by Kitching, maintaining that the people I worked with not only represented their identities in the hybrid space of their-lives-with-Facebook, but also that they actively constructed their future identities, informed by their wishes and ambitions, and facilitated by the options of representation provided by Facebook.

Gupta and Ferguson note that the experience of cultural identity is a matter of processes rather than essences (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 7). In the examples I use here, we see these processes of checking and balancing, of trial and approval, of each individual putting themselves out into the public space of Facebook and opening themselves up to feedback and possible criticism or censure from friends, family and acquaintances.

In a study on identity construction on Facebook by American students, Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin comment that: “Facebook users sought to make certain implicit identity claims aimed at generating desired impressions on the viewers (of their profiles)” (Zhao et al., 2008: 1825). For the individuals I followed on Facebook, identity was constructed socially, with friends and family commenting on photographs and text posted on the site, affirming, praising or scolding as an overall picture of evolving personality was built up over the days, months and years during which that person had a presence on the site.

An additional aspect to the young Cameroonians’ interactions on Facebook is the private (i.e.: non-public) interactions of instant messaging, adding a “concealed” or “secret” (Mbembe, 1997: 153) side to the interactions. Mbembe has reminded us that the invisible and the visible are not two separate - albeit interacting and intertwined - things, but rather that the invisible is contained in the visible (and vice versa) as one and the same thing (Mbembe, 1997: 153). Therefore, the messages sent from one user to another on Facebook, feed into the greater project of identity construction, even though they are not publically viewable.

Photographs and images are a key means of construction of one’s identity on Facebook. This visual construction of identity is tied up with the way in which people choose to act, and the presentation of that action on the public domain of Facebook is taken to be an extension of the person's personality in their normal life. However, it could also be that this representation is more of a conscious construction than straightforward reflection, as Facebook forces us to think about the fact that other people are watching us. Individuals construct their identity through implicit, and sometimes explicit, claims of belonging. The act of identity expression and construction is intimately involved with the concept of borders and boundaries. Bray deals with “the role of boundaries of various kinds in the construction and expression of identity” (Bray, 2006: 4), noting that boundaries are drawn up as individuals present themselves in certain situations. This was the case in my observations, with clothing in particular playing a role to identify people as belonging or not belonging to certain groups.

In the two cases which I analyse in this chapter, each individual was involved in constructing their identity by selecting and presenting photographs in such a way that they built up a

collage of images to represent their lives as they would like others to see them, and as they themselves would like to become and live up to. Writing about the construction of photograph albums by successive generations of Japanese American families, Chalfen (1991) refers to the production, selection and presentation of photographs as a social process and symbolic activity. The process of creating a series of photographs on Facebook can be seen as similarly symbolic, and the social aspect of the interaction initiated by this action is played out in the comments and replies allowed by this medium.

There are “several stages of decision making” (Chalfen, 1991: 7) that take place before a photograph is uploaded onto Facebook. There is the decision to bring the camera on a certain outing or occasion, the decision of what to photograph, the decision of the subject of the photograph as to what pose to adopt, and then the decision of which photographs will be selected to join the others in the collage of identity which is a Facebook profile. The fact that the photographs are selected and uploaded by the people being studied, represents an important and interesting source of data, going beyond the analysis of the photographs themselves, to ask questions about the selection of certain photographs over others and what overall portrait of themselves each individual is trying to create.

Each photograph is part of a process of interaction, presentation and representation that not only 'captures the moment,' but also invites enquiry into the back story of the event that led to the photograph. What were the people doing in the moments (days, weeks, years) leading up to the second that the image was made, and what is the person trying to achieve through the display of that particular photograph on his/her Facebook timeline?

Chalfen points to the way in which the families with whom he studied, “were using their photograph collections to sift, select, discard and retrieve specific points in and about their lives for commemoration in the form of pictorial memory” (Chalfen, 1991: 19). This process of selecting, discarding and retrieving works to build up a coherent portrait of the self, in line with the values held by the community, is indicative of the individual's place within society.

The cases that follow show the ways in which two of the young Cameroonians used Facebook, and particularly the image-sharing functions of the site, to construct their identities as people of consequence in their social networks.

### **Mokolo: Images of success**

In this section I present an analysis of two images posted on Facebook by Mokolo. I examine how each photograph speaks to an aspect of the identity to which Mokolo aspires. The first photograph is one of Mokolo.

#### ***Box 5.2***

Mokolo is standing on Camps Bay beach, one of Cape Town's premium beaches. Camps Bay is a seaside suburb of Cape Town, the prices of properties, as well as restaurant refreshments working to exclude all but the rich. In the photograph, Mokolo stands ankle-deep in the water, with the waves breaking around his lower legs, wetting the edges of his rolled-up

jeans. His arms are outstretched as if to embrace the world, and he is smiling widely. The photograph is part of a series taken at the same beach. A group of young Cameroonians play in the surf and on the sand, smiling into the camera and posing like models for the photos.

This series of photographs seem to have been selected to portray an image of 'the good life', with the people in the photos smiling into the sun as they play on the beach. They seem to suggest that the people in the pictures are able to relax and play in the sun, rather than struggling "to meet up with your life" (Ahmed, interviewed 15 February 2011, p37 this thesis) as others might have to do.

In the photograph, Mokolo's whole posture communicates expansiveness and optimism, while his positioning on Camps Bay beach places him as part of the exclusive lifestyle associated with the area.

The analysis of this photograph is aided by that which is 'hidden'. My personal history as an 'insider' in Cape Town has allowed me insight into the social and economic status of this suburb. This 'insider knowledge' allows me to appreciate Mokolo's choice, firstly to take these photographs in this setting and, secondly to display these particular pictures on Facebook.

In addition, the time that I spent with Mokolo during fieldwork highlights the contrast between what is portrayed by the photographs and what I have observed of Mokolo's life as a Cameroonian student in Cape Town. I know that he struggles to keep his academic work at a consistently high standard, while also working to build his networks in the world of business. I am also aware of his current financial difficulties as a student - and therefore not earning - while being obliged to keep up-to-date with payments such as rent and utilities.

This knowledge of what is hidden behind the photographs adds layers to the analysis of the images, and enables me to argue that these pictures are not simply images of people on a beach, but rather, an active construction of identity.

Despite my own fascination with the series of photos on Camps Bay Beach, these are not the ones that have attracted the most comments. The photos on Mokolo's profile which draw the most comments are those which show Mokolo working at his studies or of him in a 'traditional' outfit, dressed up for formal occasions in patterned material stretching from his waist to the floor, with a loose, long-sleeved white shirt and a scarf of matching material, tied around his shoulders.

In one particular picture, Mokolo stands with two other men, Paul and an older Cameroonian leader from Cape Town. They are dressed in long cloth 'wrapper' skirts, with matching neckerchiefs over loose white shirts.

The comments reproduced in box 5.3 are complimenting and approving of the clothing that Mokolo and his companions (including Paul) were wearing and the perceived expression of their identity as Cameroonian men.

**Box 5.3**

- Wow i like the outfit Paul the real sawa pple lol !!!!!
- wow, coastals in high spirits, and colourful. bravo,"
- na waoh my brother enjoy you culture. Tell and show those who are ashamed of their culture how it taste .
- this is what us the Sawa people love

With his own posts, Mokolo looks to the future with his representation, everything that he posts speaks of his ambition to advance in the world of business. His 'likes' are dominated by organizations such as 'International MBA', posts by CNN and BBC world news, 'Capital markets', 'Stock market', and 'Barclays wealth and investment management'.

**Paul: Representing worldliness**

Paul is one of the people that I worked with most closely while he was in Cape Town. He had been a pastor in Cameroon and was applying to college to do a MA degree in theology; however he did not get into a college while he was in Cape Town. About halfway through my fieldwork, in January 2012, Paul moved to South Korea to attend the Asian Centre for Theological Studies and Mission (ACTS), an interdenominational evangelical Christian school in South Korea.

Paul's cover photo is a picture of himself standing in front of an array of national flags, reminiscent of a scene from the United Nations. He is wearing a tuxedo and the photo presents him as a worldly man of consequence. The photo attracted 18 'likes' and 15 comments, many more than most photos on his timeline. Why has Paul chosen this particular photo as the cover of his profile? Is this how he wants to be portrayed to those viewing his profile? The selection of comments presented in box 5.3 suggests that the posting of this photograph has had the desired effect of conveying a sense of authority and worldliness to the people viewing Paul's profile. The first commenter has referred to Paul as "Mr Ambassador," the salutation designating respect, while the word 'ambassador' implies that Paul is seen as an international dignitary. The next two comments are complimentary, while the final comments pick up on the theme of Paul as an ambassador, but bringing it back to a serious note, suggesting that Paul is metaphorically an ambassador for God in his calling as a pastor.

**Box 5.4**

- Hello, Mr. Ambassador.
- whao pastor,you are looking great
- looks wow

- Servant of God, you are certainly an ambassador, not because you are standing in front of flags but because of your calling.

The majority of photographs on Paul's timeline are of himself and his friends and classmates from ACTS, and the comments that have been left in response to these images carry strong religious messages. A viewing and analysis of Paul's profile, suggests that he is actively constructing his identity as a pastor. The majority of posts are themselves religiously oriented, or help to build and reinforce Paul's identity among his friends and family as a religious leader.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have introduced Facebook as a historical document, as well as a site of social interaction. I have alerted the reader to the problems associated with using visual data in anthropological analysis, suggesting that the selectivity that can be seen as a weakness when dealing with visual data can also be used to the advantage of the researcher when analysing the social construction of identity as individuals select photographs and use them to create a picture of themselves and their reality. I have commented on the importance of photographs to the people that I worked with, both on and off Facebook. I have used the cases of two young Cameroonian men to illustrate how identity is co-constructed on Facebook through items posted by the men themselves and the interactions provoked by these posts among their Facebook friends. Finally, I have argued that these two people use Facebook as a space to construct their identity not only as it is and as they are, but as they would like to become.

## Chapter six

### **Conclusion: ICT and communicating success**

In this thesis, I have argued that the Cameroonian students that I worked with during my research in Cape Town between 2011 and 2013 used information and communication technology to (re)negotiate and transcend geographic and social boundaries. I have asked whether and to what extent the use of ICT allows for certain subversions of the hierarchical structures that govern mobility and belonging, and facilitates more flexible modes of being in the world. In my three discussion chapters (chapters three, four and five), I built up an argument around my observations of the use of ICT by young Cameroonians living in Cape Town, South Africa. I noted that the young people with whom I worked used cell phones (calling, texting and 'beeping'), email, and social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook to maintain and extend social relationships that existed before their move to Cape Town, and to build and extend relationships formed since their move. I have argued that the Cameroonian students in my study used ICT to build and resist social ties, and to construct and project aspects of their identity that they would like to enhance and build upon, using technology to represent themselves as they would like to become.

### **Main research findings**

In chapter three I set out the importance of social capital and social support and elucidated how ICT can be used to draw on each of these. I extended the work of my introductory chapter, exploring the ways in which these young Cameroonians wove ICT into their web of social relations, using the technology to call on social capital in times of need. They also used ICT to reach out and reinforce 'safety nets' of social support, in a pre-emptive move so that if and when crisis occurred there were plenty of people who could be called upon to cushion life's blows. In this chapter, social capital is understood as something extremely valuable and thus, something that confers power and status on the giver. I found that the Cameroonians used ICT to draw on their networks and mobilise social capital. However, I also found that they were able to use certain functions of ICT to avoid being drawn upon as sources of social capital by other people. I found that the degree of familiarity with different forms of ICT influenced the ways in which the Cameroonians used these different forms to mobilize social capital. Finally, I noted that the supportive value of communications was an important part of their use of ICT for the Cameroonians in my study.

In chapter four I examined gifting and power in the context of transnational ICT use, arguing that although the complexities of bushfalling bring a perception of imbalance into relationships of reciprocity, the young Cameroonians with whom I worked used the opportunity to meet perceived obligations to enact their success as bushfallers and achieve heightened social status in their communities. Following Mauss in understanding that the giving of a gift contains within it the obligation to reciprocate, I have argued that these imbalances and the ways in which the Cameroonians negotiated them, allowed them to assert their status as successful 'bushfallers'. Finally, I found that in asserting this success, the young Cameroonians presented themselves as sources of social capital in their communities.

In chapter five I examined the ways in which the transcendence of social and geographic boundaries is enacted in the semi-public online space of Facebook, exploring the ways in which the people with whom I worked constructed their identities through the use of visual artefacts, textual interaction, as well as through publicly affiliating themselves with individuals, causes and organisations by manipulating the functions of the site. I introduced Facebook as a historical document, but also as a site of social interaction. Using the cases of two young Cameroonian men, I have argued that, along with members of their social networks, they co-construct aspects of their identity using certain functions of Facebook. However, I have also found that, although much of this co-construction takes place in the public space of Facebook, it is essential to take account of the ‘hidden’ part of the interaction, the ‘double’ behind the ‘thing’, that is: the photograph and the comments attached to it, in order to conduct a better analysis. I argue that individuals constructed their identity on Facebook, not only to present a picture of themselves as they are, but also as they would like to become. In presenting themselves as successful, well-travelled citizens of the world, they actively renegotiate geographic and social boundaries as, along with the people who make up their social networks and community relations, they write their own future.

### **Contribution to current knowledge on mobility and ICT**

In this thesis, I have contributed a South African case study to the literature on the use of ICT in transnational migration by Cameroonians. I have examined the ways in which the Cameroonian students in my study used these technologies to build and maintain, and sometimes avoid and sever, ties of connection and belonging.

I have focussed on the projects of self-presentation with which the people in my study were engaged, as young people and particularly in their status as students.

I have built on the work of Tazanu (2012) in his discussions of the use of ICT in Cameroonian transnational sociality. I have argued that, while ICT is used by the Cameroonians in Cape Town to communicate with members of their social network, they also use certain functions of the technology to maintain distance from other members of these networks.

Tazanu investigated transnational communications relationships from the perspectives of people remaining in Cameroon, while Nyamnjoh (2005) focussed on the experience of Cameroonian immigrants living in outside of Africa. This study, focussing on the transnational communications experience of Cameroonian students in Cape Town has added a perspective of South-South migration to the literature.

Alpes pointed to the fact that the idea of bushfalling was intricately entangled with notions of responsibility. In my study I found that the Cameroonians that I worked with variously resisted and amplified this responsibility, working to become sources of social capital for some people ‘back home’ while at the same time avoiding requests for assistance that they claimed to be unfounded.

De Bruijn (2009), Katz and Aspden, (1997) and Powell (2012) explored the ways in which people act on technology, while simultaneously being affected by the technology they use.

Guided by my observations, I add my voice to that of Powell in arguing that, while people are affected by technology, this is only possible in as far they allow it to affect them.

Finally, through their global communication via ICT, the Cameroonians I worked with were part of the flows of information theorised by Appadurai (1990), however they were also subject to closures, particularly in the form of obstructive immigration legislation. In my thesis, I explored the ways in which the Cameroonians navigated these various flows and closures. I maintain that they used ICT strategically to maximise the benefits to be gained by the flows of information and social capital and to dilute the experience of these closures.

### **Directions for future research**

The limited scope of an MA thesis does not allow for definite claims as to the use of ICT by all Cameroonian students in Cape Town. The field of ICT research would benefit from further ethnographic work documenting the daily use of these technologies by Cameroonian students and indeed by other groups of people.

In my research proposal I had designed my methodology in such a way that I would conduct participant observation by following each student for a full day as they used ICT. Unfortunately this was not possible, given my own work and university schedule combined with the schedules of the Cameroonian students. As a result of this, my fieldwork was much more fragmented than I would have liked, and my observation was conducted in short bursts, rather than the complete immersion recommended for ethnography. Although this limitation allowed me to experience some of the frustrations of the Cameroonians' student life in the city, it did not allow me to gather the richness of data that would have been possible had I spent twenty four hours a day in my field site. A larger study, with a number of researchers, each spending extended amounts of time with one individual, would yield more thorough data.

Although the Cameroonians in my study could be seen as marginalised economically and to some extent socially, they were studying in South Africa and, through these academic endeavours, were engaged in turning themselves into sources of social capital for themselves and members of their social networks. As such, they were often called upon by further marginalized members of their social networks, and particularly those back in Cameroon, to assist them in their own projects of empowerment. The Cameroonians I worked with often spoke with regret of such people, claiming that they only called when they wanted something, and did nothing to keep up the relationship. Future research could add a South African case study to the existing literature examining these relationships, investigating the experience of those back in Cameroon and their communication with those who migrate.

Given the scope of this study, I focussed on certain elements of the communication landscape of the young Cameroonians I worked with. Further research could investigate the relationships between their use of other aspects of communication technology and the interplay between these. In my study I focussed on their use of Facebook and cell phone text messages and calls. Further research might investigate young Cameroonians' use of Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, Instagram and other computer and cell phone-based communication media.

In my introduction I touched briefly on the hierarchical organization of geographic spaces within the global political economy and how this provided a context to the lives of the Cameroonian students in Cape Town. However, it was beyond the scope of this project to examine in depth the inequalities and injustices associated with these issues. There is a great need for further research to investigate the lived realities of people blocked from social and economic achievement by the arbitrarily drawn lines and unjustly erected barriers that signify and enforce international borders.

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