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## **Kfaang and its technologies : towards a social history of mobility in Kom, Cameroon, 1928-1998**

Nkwi, W.G.

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## Mobility and encounters with different worlds

### Introduction

In the last four Chapters, technology was central to the discussion of geographical and social mobility and *kfaang*. This Chapter deals not only with *kfaang* but what *kfaang* meant to Kom people and how they adapted to changes of newness. The Chapter also shows how the movement of people led to changes in mentalities and to geographical landscapes. In this Chapter we see place as a production of social space because the people shared a common identity. Thus came about the reproduction of ‘Komness’ in different places. Four places viz. Bamenda, Nkongsamba, Coast and Yola were important in the production of ‘Komness’ through *kfaang*. In these places and the way people talk about showed how they were influenced by *kfaang* and new things. Therefore, central to the Chapter are the expectations regarding *kfaang* held by Kom people. *Kfaang* is both outside and inside and people have appropriated it in language and behaviour. How were Kom people shaped by *kfaang*? We examine the psychology of *kfaang* and the interplay between identity and *kfaang*. Through our discussion of Benedicta, and our knowledge of Anyway Ndichia, we can see that such individuals were an embodiment of *kfaang*. This present Chapter is the culmination of the thinking about Kom peoples’ contact with *kfaang* which has been presented so far in the previous Chapters.

The Chapter goes further to illuminate the creation of Kom out of Kom by taking Bamenda Town as an example and questions ‘Komness’ which Kom created. Benedicta told us at the beginning of the story that when she was working in Bamenda, Kom people usually met at Kubou’s compound in Old Town. Most of the informants in Kom spoke about Kubou’s compound in Old Town, and like Andersson (2001: 91) who ‘followed migrants in their geographical mobility from rural Buhera to the urban setting of Harare’, I decided to trace the compound in Bamenda. From Bamenda, the next place which occurred in the oral traditions of Kom was Nkongsamba. How important was Nkongsamba and how did it affect Kom mobility? That will constitute the second section of the Chapter. The third section treats the Coast (*itini kfaang*) which was also an area which generated narratives back at home. Local people also brought to Kom many new things (*ghii fou kfaang*) from the Coast which were accepted and adapted by Kom people in Kom. The fourth section deals with Kom contact with Yola, while the fifth section examines the depth and durability of *kfaang*. Map 8.1 shows the various roads of mobility used by Kom people.

Different worlds came to mean different geographical regions and different mental maps of the people but ultimately *kfaang* in Kom. The different contacts created by Kom people established new socio-cultural pattern that had a significant impact on Kom with *kfaang* standing out as the most distinct of these adopted patterns. Did everybody embrace it? Or did some reject it?

Map 8.1 Some of the mobility patterns generated by Kom people between 1928 and 1998



Source: Compiled from archival, secondary and oral sources

## Kom-Bamenda encounter: Kubou's compound (*a beiKubou*), old town

### *A brief history of Bamenda*

Bamenda is situated some 72 kilometres from Kom. Its name had been wrapped in some ambiguities. The Germans annexed Cameroon in 1884 but it was only by the end of that century that they pacified the hinterland people by outright force. They first established a garrison at Mendakwe, the area from which the name Bamenda derives. Upon arrival in the Bamenda Grasslands, the Germans through Eugene Zintgraff concluded blood pacts with Bali people. For the meantime, Bali became a temporary base for the Germans in the Grasslands.<sup>1</sup> Since Bali was low-lying it is speculated that the Germans had to transfer their capital to the more high rugged mountainous Mendakwe about 35 kilometres east of Bali, obviously for strategic reasons (Awambeng, 1991: 4). Bamenda then became the headquarters of the German administration in the Grasslands.

The name, Bamenda, became prominent during the British colonial era and denoted the entire sub-region which was known as the Bamenda Province with its capital of Bamenda itself. It was because of its administrative and commercial services that many people migrated to Bamenda either to work in the colonial service or for commercial reasons. In effect, Bamenda was founded by migrants. Trading activities between the Hausa settlers and nearby groups soon prompted the latter to establish their own settlements beside the Hausa traders.<sup>2</sup> There they sold local commodities such as palm oil and kola nuts to Hausa in return for cattle, brass work and jewellery. Colonial reports show that between 1927 and 1928 the settlement had grown to a population of 753, excluding the European administrators and missionaries (Awambeng, 1991: 4). These settlements gradually increased due to the immigration of people from Bali, Kom, Bum and Oku. There is also strong historical evidence in colonial reports that some ex-service men of the First and Second World Wars who were also newly converted Christians were not comfortable going back to their villages,<sup>3</sup> so they preferred to settle in Old Town.

In 1949 Bamenda became the administrative capital of Bamenda Province which consisted of Wum, Nkambe and Bamenda itself. Out of a total population of 264,790 of this division in 1953, 10,000 people lived in Abakwa, the former and original name of Bamenda.<sup>4</sup> Abakwa also continued to play a commercial role and hosted firms like UAC, John Holt and Hollando and Barclays Bank International. The UAC and John Holt specialised in buying coffee and palm kernels from the indigenous farmers. These companies also retailed assorted products like umbrellas, buckets, spoons, bicycles and zinc.<sup>5</sup>

According to Fokwang (2008) corroborated by Fuh (2009), 'Old Town' was actually the origin of Bamenda even though government and local municipal records con-

<sup>1</sup> File Cb (1916) Confidential Report Bamenda Province, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1916 by G.S.Podevin (NAB); Also see Report by Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the General Assembly of United Nations on the Administration of the Cameroons under United Nations (PRO).

<sup>2</sup> File NW/Re/a/1928/1 Hausa Town: Bamenda (Bamenda Provincial Archives).

<sup>3</sup> File Cb (1924) 4 Report No.4-1924, Bamenda Division (Cameroons) Annual Report (NAB); Also see, File Ba (1925) 1 Report on the Administrative organization and Progress of the British Cameroons for the Year 1925, (NAB); File Ba (1924) 2 Report for the League of Nations, 1924 (NAB).

<sup>4</sup> File Cb (1953) 1 Bamenda Province Annual Report by Acting Resident, A.B. Westmacott (NAB).

<sup>5</sup> File Cb/1958/1 Annual Report for Bamenda Division, 1957 by Senior District Officer for Bamenda Mr. R.J. Elkerton (NAB).

sistently bore the name of Old Town. It was simply the name of Abakwa which was especially old in relation to the newer neighbourhood that had grown up over the past forty years or so. It was the Old Town whose name ran through most of Kom narratives in their encounters with Bamenda.<sup>6</sup> It was also in Old Town that Kubou, a Kom returnee from the First World War, settled. It was in his compound that people from Kom constructed their home and saw it as a gateway to diasporic places from the late 1920s to the late 1970s.

### Journey from Kom to old town (Bamenda), 1928 - c. 1970s

According to Kom oral sources, the journey to Bamenda was a three to four day trek from Kom, depending on which part of Kom the person was coming from. If the person was coming from Njinikom the journey took three days. The first leg of the journey was from Njinikom through *Ngwin Falla*<sup>7</sup> passing through *Kikfiini*; went down *Ngwin Kwabeilla* (Kwabeilla Hill) and overnighing in Mbigou. On the second leg, the person spent the night at Babanki or Kedjom Ketinguh. On the third day the person reached Bamenda. But if the person was coming from Fundong the journey took four days because people had to spend an additional night at Njinikom.<sup>8</sup>

So exact was the planning that when the people set out they knew just where the night would fall. The arrival in Bamenda was like reaching a rest and relay point. While resting, people had to be directed and redirected to where they expected to meet their friends and relatives. The first Kom person in Bamenda was Kubou and his compound became a place which the other Kom people saw as a gateway which they had to pass before taking off to further destinations.

According to his oldest surviving widow, Catherine Ngeh Nayou, Kubou was born in 1908 and married her in 1928. He was a man of Ndonambang lineage from Anyajua. He was recruited into the German army at the outbreak of the First World War. When the Germans were defeated in 1918 he was among the Cameroon soldiers that followed the German troops to Fernando Po. When he returned in 1920 with other Kom ex-soldiers he bought a piece of land in Bamenda and constructed two houses at Old Town popularly known in those days as Abakwa. Subsequently, he built more houses and the compound became very large with three gates. It was constructed of local building

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<sup>6</sup> A plethora of archival materials have survived to show how Bamenda evolved in the colonial and post colonial periods. For some of the files which are found in PRO, NAB and Bamenda Provincial Archives see, File Cb (1916) Confidential Report Bamenda Province 28 February 1916 by G.S. Podevin (NAB); Report by Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the General Assembly of United Nations on the Administration of Cameroons under United Nations, 1948, (PRO); Annual Report, 1950-1951 for Bamenda Division (NAB); File Cb (1951) Bamenda Division Annual Report for 1951; File NW/Re /a/1921/1 Hausa Town; File Cb (1924) 4, Report No.4-1924 Bamenda Division (Cameroons) Annual Report (NAB); File Ba (1925) 1 Report on the Administrative organisation and progress of the British Cameroons for the year 1925 (NAB); File Cb (1953) 1 Bamenda Province Annual Report by Acting Resident, A.B. Westmacott (NAB). Awambeng has provided an excellent work on the evolution of urban towns in Bamenda, Wum, Kumba and Mbengwi. See Christopher M. Awambeng, 1991, *Evolution and Growth of Urban Centres in the Northwest Province (Cameroon): Case Studies Bamenda, Kumbo, Mbengwi and Wum* (Berne: European Academic Publishers, 1991), pp. 4-10.

<sup>7</sup> Ngwin Falla literally meant the hill where the early Rev. Father's were received by Christians of Njinikom. From the hill they were taken to the church compound.

<sup>8</sup> Interview Anna Ayumchua, Njinikom, 10 June 2008.

materials – grass, elephant grass and mud. Its architectural outlook resembled the Kom palace back in Kom which had gates leading to different three lodges.

The compound used to be very busy accommodating Kom people who were passing through Bamenda. As many as fifty to sixty people were known to have spent the night during the Christmas period. They were coming from the Coast. The few women in the compound spent much time cooking for the travellers. Children were charged with fetching water and wood for fuel.<sup>9</sup>

Chia Kiyam, another Kom person who knew Kubou, says:

As far as I know, that compound started between the late 1920s and early 1930s and it was constructed by Kubou who had fought the First World War. He came back and remained in Bamenda and after sometime he had a job with the British colonial administration I think as a yard man. The compound gained its prominence because of the frequent mobility of Kom and after sometime it was given the title as Kom palace because even the foyn of Kom when he visited Bamenda with his entourage stayed in Kubou's compound. After sometime there was *njang* formed in the compound known as *njang a bei ni Kubou* (the njang of Kubou's compound). Many Kom people stayed there before heading through to wherever you were going. There was a lot of trekking done by Kom people and it took about 14 days on foot to arrive at the Coast.<sup>10</sup>

A significant remark from the above passage concerns the fact that Kom people had started practising their culture through song and dances, of which the most popular was *njang*. *Njang* is traditional music reflecting elements of traditional folklore. Most of the time the music and songs referred to important historical events. Those who composed the songs were usually perceived by the public as people who had received inspiration from the ancestral world. Those who danced and sang *njang* were men and women, girls and boys. Traditional instruments like metal gongs and a small drum are used during the choreography (Gam Nkwi, 2006: 62-76). Kubou's compound was also known as Kom palace. And the compound was a meeting point for all Kom who were passing through Bamenda to Mamfe, Kumba, Buea, Victoria, Nkongsamba and Eastern Nigeria. Those who did not know the way to their destinations had to wait at Kubou's for people who knew the way to their destinations. For those who could not find other accommodation in Bamenda, Kubou's compound provided one.

The importance of Kubou's compound does not only emerge from its role in accommodating Kom migrants. It was not just a stopover on the long journeys. More importantly, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it hosted a Kom meeting every Sunday. Just as Schipper (1999: 2) has observed that 'throughout the centuries, human beings have created binaries, devising images of themselves as opposites of others and have embedded such images in stories, songs and other forms of expressions', Kom people also drank palm wine (a milky-like liquid tapped from a palm tree) and ate their traditional meals which consist of fufu corn and roast chicken (*abain ni gwei e katign e*). In that meeting Kom socialized as they did in their villages. By doing so they included and excluded others who did not belong to their group. The point here is that Kom people were identifying themselves through their culture but outside of Kom and at the same time constructing a home from home in the course of their geographical mobility. The cultural meetings were soon matched with a cultural association in support of the

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Catherine Ngeh Nayou, 21 November 2008. She was the first wife of that compound and further maintains that the compound burnt down in the late 1930s. The fire brought untold misery to Kom who were always passing through the compound.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Bartholomew Kiyam Chia, Njinikom, 23, 24 and 25 September 2008.

culture as they felt and imagined it back in geographically bounded Kom. Lucas Kijem was another Kom person who knew Kubou.

Lucas was born in 1931 at Njinikom and he went to St. Anthony's Primary School, Njinikom, from 1942 to 1948 when he obtained his Standard Six Certificate. From there he went to live with his uncle near Kubou's compound. After sometime he proceeded to St. Joseph College, Sasse where he graduated with the West African School Certificate, Grade I in 1956. He proceeded to Ilosogun, Nigeria, where he was introduced to elementary teaching by his teacher who taught him in Njinikom school, Mr. Stephen Tita. He then proceeded to a prison's training course in Lagos where he graduated in 1960. He worked briefly in Buea and then left for further training at Walefield, United Kingdom in 1964 because he had pressed interest in the treatment of young offenders in prisons. So it was recommended that he follow the course at Walefield. Returning from the UK to Bamenda, he was again sent to Buea. He succeeded in enrolling at the University College, Swaziland, which was part of the University of Wales, to follow a diploma course. He was there for two years. By virtue of his performance he was granted a scholarship by the Cameroon government to proceed to a Degree course. He returned to Cameroon in 1974. While in Cameroon he worked in Yaoundé, Maroua and Bamenda. He went on retirement in 1985. He has six children. Four of them are in the United States of America and two in Cameroon.

In speaking about the place, he reveals how Kubou's compound played the role of a palace.

I have never met him (Kubou) personally. But (...) I know much about him from the traders who passed through the compound and what I observed when I first came to Bamenda in 1940. He was very paternal and a receptive man too. The role which he played to Kom people who were always passing through Bamenda made him to become so important and because of the good stories of the compound the *nkwifoyn* of Kom through the orders of the Fon, Fon Ngam, decided to make that compound a Kom palace annex here in Bamenda. For all the years that I was here the Fon of Kom always slept there when he was going on tour.

Traditionally the compound was recognised. Kubou used to confer traditional titles on the people that deserved them and these titles were recognised in Kom without any questioning. The Kom meeting in Bamenda is a very old one. By the time I came back from Nigeria in 1952 the meeting was already in place. So I cannot even tell when it started. What I noticed about the meeting since then is that it is a rally point of Kom. It shows a very strong sense of belonging.

Their culture was seriously upheld. The *tamajong* was always there, the *majong*, the *ikeng* and cultural dances. Everything that related to the culture was upheld. Although we have only one Fon in Kom there was one here who of course did not pass through the ritual passage but who was well respected. In Kom, the Kubou's compound is generally known as Kom compound and it is the rally point of Kom people. When Kom people rally here they always voted their leader depending on how old the person has been in Bamenda. It is also the oldest Kom compound in Bamenda.<sup>11</sup>

The remarks of these informants points to the fact that Kubou's compound was a central destination for travellers from Kom. They would stay there overnight and continue the next day. It was at Kubou's compound that people found their way and were re-directed to their destinations. The parallel of such a compound today would be the Global Positioning System (GPS) which people use to get themselves to areas that cannot be easily located. In the case of Kubou's compound we could conveniently see it as a cultural GPS.

That compound gradually grew in reputation and became the 'palace' of Kom people outside Kom. During the British administration, when the Fon came to Bamenda with

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Lucas Kijem, Old Town, 28 April 2008 and 25 July 2009.

his entourage to have a meeting with the Resident, they all stayed at Kubou's compound. One might be tempted to call the compound a hostel or a rest house. While such terms are not altogether inappropriate, they do not reflect the fact that no payment was demanded, and the Kom traditional way of thinking does not incorporate the notion of hostels. While at Kubou's compound people were freely fed. Kubou's wives and children were charged with the heating of water when people took their baths. In the morning they breakfasted and thus were prepared for their onward journeys. Kijem's story seems to illustrate to us the sense of social and ethnic identity and solidarity which was re-enforced by Kubou's compound with the social and political hierarchies arising from its existence. The Fon of Kom designated a Fon in Bamenda who in turn could also designate other Kom traditional officials there. It is important to note in the informants' narrative, the 'travelling to Kom' which meant that Kom were already shifting from their geographical nucleus. In short therefore, Kubou's compound was hospitable. It had a reputation and it replicated culture. Finally, it played a royal function by installing Fons. All these were characteristics of the Kom palace back in Kom.

There were also periods when travellers stayed at Kubou's compound for more than a week, either because they were waiting for their kith and kin or just to have rest. During that period they worked on his farms and if there was building work they helped to gather local building materials like elephant grass for the work.<sup>12</sup> One person who participated in building the 'Kom palace' (*nto,oh* Kom), was Yindo Mbah. In 1958 he spent one week there and became aware there was a Kom meeting was to be held known as Kom State Union. Mbah pointed out that while Kubou's compound rendered a service to Kom people, Kom people also rendered him service.

Gradually, the construction of Kubou's compound became the communal effort of Kom people just as with the construction of Kom palace at Laikom. Kom people in Bamenda as well as those who were passing through performed this service as if they were constructing the Fon's palace and did so willingly.<sup>13</sup> The photo below shows Kubou's compound as in November 2008, almost dilapidated beyond repair. This was probably because with the improvements in the roads, the introduction of transport vehicles and the influx of many Kom people into Bamenda in recent times, the importance of the compound has dwindled considerably

The first encounter with Kubou's compound was the first major stage in the travels of Kom people earlier in the twentieth century. It helped to orient travellers to their distant destinations, while providing accommodation. In the process people came to be connected to others by using the compound as a meeting point. In Mbah's view people felt as if they were actually in Kom and were happy meeting others and making new friends. The Fon of Kom frequently visited Bamenda and honoured Kom people there and ordered *nkwife* nominated by Kubou as his *nchindas*, while recognizing Kubou as the Fon of all Kom living in Bamenda.<sup>14</sup> In a sense Kom as home had shifted from being only a geographical location to something to be found outside the region's borders, a social construct and a place for celebrating Kom rituals. For example, the Fon of Kom would visit Bamenda with his retinue in full regalia, and Kubou was also installed with regalia as the Fon of Kom people in Bamenda.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Nathalia Kuokuo, Njinikom, 7 August 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Yindo Mbah, Atuilah, Njinikom, 22 September 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Yindo Mbah, Njinikom, 25 September 2008.





Photo 8.1 Kubou's compound in November 2008

Source: Author's collection

### Kubou's compound in Cameroon politics

The rise of 'Komness' fell together with significant developments in the politics of Cameroon. The formation of the Kom Association gave way to the Kom State Union (KSU) in the story of Kubou's compound. Kom people in Bamenda saw Kom through the eyes of a state beyond the confines of Kom itself, and understood it as a state worth taking critically. Kom people still saw themselves as belonging to the geographical location of Kom, the creation of Fon Yuh I (c. 1865-1912) with its motto of *Wain-Afojiina-Nyamngviyn* (child, food, and prosperity). But not only that.

One of the founding members of the KSU was Peter Diyen. Born in 1936, Diyen first attended the Baptist Mission Primary School at Anyajua, Kom, in 1949. In 1950, he continued schooling at Belo, Kom and in 1951 attended St. Anthony's Primary School, Njinikom. He obtained his Standard Six Certificate in 1956. In the 1956-57 academic year, he went to the Probationer Teacher's Training College (PTTC) Mankon, Bamenda and graduated in 1958. In 1959 Diyen attended the Elementary Teacher's College, Bambui, where he graduated in 1960. From 1961 to 1962, he taught in Bafreng (Nkwen), Bamenda, and from 1962 to 1964 taught in Big Mankon, Bamenda. From 1965 to 1966 Diyen underwent an advanced teacher's course in Bambui. After graduation he taught in Baingo, Kom, from 1969 to 1970 and from 1970 to 1975 he taught in Marie Gorrieti's Primary School, Njinikom. From 1975 to 1985 he was in Fuanantui where he taught until 1995 when he retired. Diyen says of the creation of KSU:

All of us were mostly youths from various backgrounds - some were tailors, some were apprentice motor mechanics, carpenters and some were just unemployed. We were more than fifty. One thing was that we were quite proud to be Kom people in Bamenda and to live our culture as in Kom. During the meeting the issue of a name for the association was hotly debated. All sorts of names were suggested but the one that won the day was KSU. The main aim of the association was to bring ourselves kom youths in a more formal way. So they could help each other in times of sickness or

death. In case of death there were contributions to carry the corpse home to Kom. It was also to promote development in Kom and finally express Kom way of doing things and lead our children to know Kom culture since most of us at the time were living and working in Bamenda. That association met every Sunday and after the deliberations *Njang* Kom danced and within a space of two years Kom people had many more cultural events complete with masquerades. We also thought that those who were passing through Bamenda to places like in Kumba, Buea and Victoria would need our help. In that case there was no hesitation to help your brother or sister from home.<sup>15</sup>

Diyen's account reveals that Kom in Bamenda in the late 1950s had a strong sense of belonging which enabled them to help each other because of their identification of themselves as people of Kom. Cultural identity and the sense of belonging were two sides of the same coin. The logic of belonging implied exclusion rather than inclusion. People always felt the 'we' and 'us' as against 'the others'. Belonging involves selection because it privileged exclusion over inclusion. Once that process has taken place, it can be argued that identities are strengthened. Kom therefore formed their cultural association to maintain 'Komness' and to show that they belonged to a geographical area known as Kom. De Bruijn et al. (2001: 84) have argued that 'population movements have always been and are still important vehicles for self promotion (...) people sometimes create ideological spaces to constitute some form of identity which produces and allows for mobility (...) these aspects of identity do not directly enhance their situation in material terms, they nevertheless provide people with a social network, a sense of belonging (...)' Kom people in Bamenda as shown by Diyen worked towards that end and helped their kin to live together.

Diyen's reference to development in Kom needs further explication. Many of the Kom educated elite in Bamenda participated in development projects in Kom. These projects included the construction of a health centre at Aduk; a modern post office in Njinikom and school building in Fundong, which were some of the projects supported by the KSU. This was facilitated by the annual contribution of money from Kom people who could afford to help. Once targeted sums were reached, labour was provided by the villages in which the development projects were carried out.<sup>16</sup>

In 1966 Cameroon became a one party state. The head of state justified the step on the grounds of greater political unity. One year later the Cameroon government tried to abolish any ethnic formation. On 12 June 1967 'ethnic' associations were banned in the following words: 'any associations exhibiting exclusively tribal or clan features: (a) any association which claims to admit as members only those coming from a named clan or tribe; (b) any association which, without altogether excluding those from other clans or tribes, in fact pursues an object contrary to national unity' (Bayart, 1973: 127). This rationale was also put forward in 1972 in order to abolish the weak federal system and to replace it with a unitary state. The creation of a unitary state led to the centralization of powers in the hands of the head of state. As a result, Cameroon was governed by presidential decrees (Ngoh, 2004: 143-185). One of those decrees banned all ethnic associations, including the KSU (Bayart, 1973: 127).

After 1990, President Biya 'democratised' Cameroon and the formation of ethnic associations was once again permitted (on ethnic associations see Gam Nkwi, 2006: 123-146; Nyamnjoh & Rowlands, 1998: 320-337). The KSU was revived at Kubou's compound. Kom in Bamenda had grown in leaps and bounds. In 1998 there were more

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Peter Diyen, Balikumato, Kom, 28 September 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Peter Diyen, Balikumato, Kom, 28 September 2008.

than 15,000 Kom people living in Bamenda, working in all walks of life.<sup>17</sup> In 1998 the Fon visited Bamenda and top on his agenda was to encourage Kom people to continue living their 'Komness' in Bamenda by respecting the Kom ways.

The following photos show the Fon's visit in Bamenda.



*Photo 8.2* The Fon's arrival in Bamenda. The Fon looks on with a wry smile from his car while a young page is astounded. The interesting thing is the Fon in the car.

*Source:* Komtangi Julius Yong's collection

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<sup>17</sup> I obtained this figure from the Kom Register which was at the secretary's house, Terence Chambam, Bamenda, 28 January 2009.



*Photo 8.3* A partial view of Kom people in their official traditional outfit receiving their Fon in Bamenda

*Source:* Komtangi Julius Yong's collection



*Photo 8.4* The Fon's entourage which included the head of *nkwifon* notables *nchisendo* drinking from their buffalo horn and while kitting others with traditional insignias.

*Source:* Komtangi Julius Yong's collection



*Photo 8.5* The introduction of a chindo to the *nkwifon* bench who has just been newly knighted. Note the coca-cola bottle and half bottle of wine at the far end.

*Source:* Komtangi Julius Yong's collection

### The significance of Kubou's compound for the creation of 'Komness'

The Fon's visit, the exhibition of Kom culture at Kubou's residence and the creation of the Kom community in Bamenda show the construction and reinforcement of 'Komness' in diasporic spaces. It indicates that wherever they found themselves Kom remained loyal to their home. Taming and domesticating these places and spaces as in Bamenda signified the creation of new homes, seen and understood as a way of coping with life and culture outside Kom. The final place was home in Kom where they would eventually prefer to end their lives, as the cases of Benedicta and most Kom informants showed us. Here they can be viewed as 'essentialist Kom' from their garments. But in other respects they change as they consumed new commodities in new locales. The need to 'Komify' distant places and selves suggests the notion of 'virtual' and 'real' Kom, a situation which could be quite ambiguous.

The real Kom was the one that geographically mapped out boundaries in previous times. These boundaries however were not completely static. The introduction of Kom boundaries in Chapter Three showed that Kom was a negotiated and navigated entity, given the fact that much of Kom was gained through warfare and that the migration to the area that became known as Kom did not happen in a vacuum. The migrants met people, *ndonali*, and also displaced others as well as intermingling with them. This occurred mainly through intermarriage. The migration to and the creation of the Fandom of Kom involved both displacement and fusion. In that sense therefore we had something that we could call 'geographical Kom' which was made up of a mixture of people in a geographical space. There was also 'virtual Kom'.

Virtual Kom was the one which existed in the minds of Kom expatriates, who belonged to networks of belonging and solidarity. But the virtual is also in a sense real.

The whole issue is far from simple. While in Holland I attended several meetings of Kom people who wanted to confirm their 'Komness'. There were many who could barely speak the Kom language. Some were married to European wives. That prompted us to critically engage in the question of Kom identity, not as a geographical one but the one that identified Kom people as Kom. The essentiality of Kom identity does not lie in language alone or culture *per se* but more in the craving for belonging. Kom people can adapt to *kfaang*.

These are indications that over the years the movement of people in and out of Kom and their encounters have added a new dimension to their identity or 'Komness'. As Nyamnjoh (2010) has recently argued concerning cultural identity, '(...) identity could be imagined and real (...) in a way it is an invitation to contemplate a de-territorialised mode of belonging where relations matter more than birthplaces in whether or not one feels at home'. He and Pelican further maintain that

(...) pre-colonial and post colonial identities in Cameroon and throughout Africa are complex, negotiated and relational experiences that call for a nuanced rather than an essentialist articulation of identity and belonging. With the Tikar *which Kom is included* as well as any group in Cameroon and Africa being authentic is a function of the way race, place, culture, class and gender define and prescribe, include and exclude. These social hierarchies assume different forms depending on encounters, power relations and prevalent notions of personhood, agency and community (Nyamnjoh, 2002: 112-113; 2007a: 73-82; 2007b: 305-332; Pelican 2006).

It can be argued thus that Kom identity has started to shift from the essentialist standpoint which we saw in Chapter Three that maintained Kom as being frozen in geographic terms. This dynamism in Kom identity is indicated by informants.

The transformation of Kubou and the continuous creation of Kom in Bamenda also brings up the primordial argument which according to Appadurai (1996: 140) maintains that 'all group sentiments that involve a strong sense of group identity, of we-ness, draw on those attachments that bind small, intimate collectivities, usually those based on kinship or its extensions. Ideas of collective identity based on shared claims to blood, soil or language draw their affective force from the sentiments that bind small groups'. Appadurai here was referring to the thesis that people who have a strong sense of togetherness derive their inspiration from kinship, language and geographical origin. Gheris (2005: 285) argues that 'there is a logical relationship between the person and the community to which he or she belongs. An analysis of the social network brings out this double relationship (...) The network is complete when its members are interdependent. Its strength and dynamism depend on the extent to which its members have confidence in one another'. In other words it could be said that trust and confidence were at the core of building social networks.

That assumption could also be argued to have been important in the building of social networks among Kom during the period of geographical mobility and the growth of the community in Bamenda (on social networks, see Freeman, 2006; Radcliff, 1940; Wellman & Berowitz, 1988; Scott, 1991; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). But as Appadurai also indicates, studies of identity creation recently undermine what had come to be seen as self-evident. Clifford (1988: 14) argues that 'Twentieth-century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures and traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts (...)'. That comes closer to Kom behaviour and their attempt to sustain a cultural identity. The Fon and his entourage, as shown in the photos, are resplendently dressed, but what keeps them travelling is the urge to maintain 'Komness' or Kom cultural identity in a time of change. In the history

of Kom mobility, 'Komness' does not exist as bounded and frozen in time. The 'requiem' and 'dirge' of bounded cultural identities seem to have been sung by scholars such as Nyamnjoh (2006: 228-241).

Nyamnjoh (2010: 24) helps to clarify things in the following words:

If cultural identities exist not as natural or bounded realities, but as dynamic realities that are socially, politically and historically produced, then cultural identities or communities are to quote Anderson, 'imagined realities' not in the sense of being fabricated or false, but in that they are the products of imagination and creativity. The members of the imagined communities need not know one another personally to believe and assume their belonging together, *BUT* every imagined community needs to work hard to keep together, as identities are always contested and subject to renegotiation with changing configurations informed by internal and external hierarchies of interconnections (...).

Nyamnjoh's point is well taken. Kom imagined their reality and so needed to sustain their identity in any way possible. One of these ways has been for Kom to form cultural associations in diasporic places. Even when the state of Cameroon attempted to interfere with their imagined identity they hung on to it - practising their traditional dances, inviting their paramount ruler to visit Bamenda to reinvigorate their identity. There is a dynamism that maintains 'Komness' and that is hard work. The pictures as shown in Photos 8.2, 8.3, 8.4 and 8.5 illustrate that fact. Therefore to see 'Komness' in terms of bounded identity is to impoverish 'Komness' as a dynamic reality. This also holds true for other ethnic groups in the Bamenda Grasslands. Most researchers in this region have treated cultural identities as though they were bounded (for instance, see Ngwa, 2010: 132-145).

By and large, the importance attached to Kubou's compound was not constant all the time. It petered or dwindled out with the introduction of the motor car amongst Kom people in the mid-1950s. After that time, motor vehicle transport enabled people to commute rapidly between Kom and Mamfe, and thence if desired to the Coast. The law banning ethnic associations also undermined the importance of Kubou's compound. Only in the early 1990s did the compound and the process of projecting 'Komness' in Bamenda become rejuvenated when ethnic associations once again were legally recognised.

At various times what might be termed the 'Kubou factor' or the vitality of ethnic association, was reproduced in different areas in Cameroon and beyond with the same cohesion. A variation on the same theme could be found in Kumba, where the compound of Mbungson Yang played the same role which Kubou's played in Bamenda. There was Adamu in Mamfe; Ndichia Timti in Tiko; Jerome Gwellem in Victoria; Yuh Ndi in Buea. Kom constantly was addressed by its geographical location outside Kom. It was therefore common to hear Kom Bamenda; Kom Buea; Kom Victoria; Kom Nkambe; Kom Wum; Kom Mbengwi. These names denote Kom people who had been geographically mobile and were living in those places. In terms of comparison and contrast these places are all the consequences of one factor - spatial mobility which brought Kom people to their ultimate destinations. The dynamics which brought them together were the same and included, trade, the demand for labour in the plantations and working opportunities in post-independent Cameroon.

Knowledge of the world outside Kom spread rapidly among those with the interest to listen. Older emigrants from Kom acted as it were the role of the Fon. Those who left Kom without being sure of their destination could follow the paths of the pioneers, for instance, to Bamenda. The encounter in Bamenda at Kubou's allowed Kom people to feel at home, to pause for rest and to find their bearings. As Greico (1998: 704-736),

who studied the effects of migration on the establishment of networks amongst the Indians of Fiji, observed, the compound of Kubou showed how networks within an ethnic group could be established in the course of geographical mobility. It was above all, also a strategy for adapting to urban life in the course of geographical mobility (Graves & Graves, 1974: 117-151). From Kubou's compound Kom went in various directions, one of which was Nkongsamba in French Cameroon. Our attention will now turn to Nkongsamba. The story of Nkongsamba adds to Kom identity in a special way. Its importance lay in the materiality of *kfaang* or 'newness'.

### Nkongsamba or 'Nkong', 1922-1961: Mobility and coffee

The earliest time at which Kom people reached Nkongsamba (which was fondly shortened by them to 'Nkong'), was in 1922. These people were traders and Catholic Christians. A journey to Nkongsamba took approximately ten to eleven days from Kom. These people were mostly from Njinikom, Fuanantui, Abuh and Ajin which were the hub of Christianity and traders. They hardly remembered where they paused and rested on their way, as was the case in Bamenda. But some remembered that they stopped at Mkongbu, a border village between French and British Cameroons.<sup>18</sup> They started at Babaju and reached Mbouda the next day. The next stop was Dschang, and the third Melong. The trek was very tedious and trekkers were accompanied by young boys who fetched fuel.<sup>19</sup>

Nkongsamba was on the former German railway line terminus. It was 109 miles from Bamenda. Its importance lay in the fact that when heavy building materials such as zinc, cement and other imports like kerosene and salt came from Europe, they were transported there by train. In his report to the League of Nations, the D.O. for Bamenda, W.E. Hunt, said among other things that '(...) imported goods must be brought from Douala by the French Railway to Nkongsamba and thence 109 miles by head portorage to Bamenda...'<sup>20</sup>

In the early 1920s and 1930s the place rose to prominence because of the goods that were brought there and retailed and distributed, making it a vital trade centre. This facilitated the construction of the 'modern' church in Njinikom, a concrete example of *kfaang*. The church usually selected only robust young men to go to Nkongsamba to transport heavy materials to Kom. The round trip to and from Nkongsamba comprised eighteen to nineteen days. More carriers and frequent trips meant more goods, and new things, *ghi fou kfaang*, one of which seems to have been coffee, recalled by Kom people as *fghi bangi sii fi kfaang*, red eye of newness, for its red colour. This luxury commodity too represented newness.

Oral testimonies strongly suggest that a long distance trader, Thaddeus Kuma Nanain, introduced coffee cultivation to Kom in 1933. He was born around 1908 and was baptised at Nso in 1924. He was responsible for guiding young Christians on their trek to Nkongsamba.<sup>21</sup> In his experience, he had seen that when the coffee seedlings

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Peter Yuh, Njinikom, 28 September 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> File No.474/1921 Ba (1922)2, Report for the League of Nations 1922; Report on the Bamenda Division of Cameroon Province for the League of Nations by Mr.W.E. Hunt, District Officer (NAB).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Peter Mbeng, 65 years, Wombong, 20 March 2008. His father was one of the pioneer coffee farmers; Joseph Nkuo Chongwain Tohbu, 89 years Achajua, 13 April 2009. He was an eyewitness-



were ready they were peeled and dried. The first person to whom he sold the dried coffee beans was Rev. Fr. Leo Onderwater, a Dutch Priest and who had known about coffee from the Dutch colony in Indonesia. The priest preached about its importance as a cash crop, as a source of income to the people. Coffee cultivation rapidly spread across the whole of Kom and Kom became an important area of coffee cultivation in the Bamenda Grasslands.<sup>22</sup>

Some of the earliest coffee farmers in Kom were Michael Tim, George Nkwi, John Ngongmbong, Gabriel Timchia, Sixtus Boo, Ferdinand Munteh, Paul Funjom and Pius Ngong. These pioneer coffee farmers became quite wealthy. They were able to send their children to school, pay for modern medical attention and build better houses with stones which were now roofed with zinc. Although these people were not alienated from Kom tradition, the architecture which they introduced estranged them from other Kom people who still constructed houses of grass and mud. In other areas which included the Bakweri, Ardener (1996: 216), observed that such buildings caused people to see their owners to belong to *nyongo*. In a single coffee season between 1936 and 1959 an average farmer earned 45 pounds, which according to the standards of the time was quite a lot of money. In 1985 alone, the money paid to farmers in Kom was 865.618.594 FRS CFA (Euro, 1,321,555).<sup>23</sup>

The first coffee farmers were those who sent their children to school and were the first to complete their school fees. For instance, George Nkwi had six children and all of them went beyond elementary school. One became a university professor. George also sponsored his nephews in school and one of the nephews who directly benefited from his financial generosity was Henry Foinkijem. According to Henry, his uncle was always there to take care of his school needs – paying his school fees on time and buying his books.

Thaddeus Kuma had seven children. All the children went to at least elementary school. One of the children rose to the rank of the Regional Pedagogic Inspector for Biology. He was Nobert Kuma Tosah, born in 1951. He attended the Roman Catholic Primary School at Sho, Kom from 1959 to 1965. He enrolled in St. Bede's Secondary School, Ashing, Kom from 1965 to 1970 when he obtained his London General Certificate Ordinary Levels in 1970. He taught in the RCM primary school, Bonadikombo, from 1971 to 1972. He thereafter entered Cameroon College of Arts Science and Technology (CCAST), Bambili, Bamenda from 1972 to 1974. From 1974 to 1975, he taught in the Seat of Wisdom College, Secondary School Fontem. Between 1975 and 1978, he entered the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Bambili, a higher teachers' training college. When he graduated in 1978 he continued in the second cycle of that college in Yaoundé. After his graduation in 1980, he was posted to teach in CCAST Bambili where he taught from 1980 to 1996. In January 1997 he was made the Regional Inspector for Biology for the Southwest Region. According to him, he likened coffee to 'gold', which was solely responsible for his education and subsequently for his geographical and

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ness to the introduction and spread of coffee cultivation in Kom; Bartholomew Nkwain, 65 years, Atuilah, 20 April 2009; His father, Nkwain Miisi was another person who encouraged coffee production by giving a plot on which a small cooperative was constructed. Interview with Francis Chiafukuin Ngam, 91 years, Fundong, 20 July 2008.

<sup>22</sup> File Ag/1934/1 Coffee Industry in Bamenda (NAB); File Ac/g/1949/3 Coffee General Correspondence Bamenda Division (NAB); File Ac/1951/2 Coffee Production and Development in the Cameroon Province (NAB).

<sup>23</sup> Kom Area Cooperative Union Limited, 26 Anniversary Booklet, 1956-1985.

social mobility. He claimed that it was also because of coffee that his father was able to sponsor them in school.<sup>24</sup> These few examples show that coffee farmers became a new hierarchy in Kom. They gained new wealth from coffee cultivation.

Coffee was also responsible for the geographical mobility of Kom people. As more people became engaged in the cultivation of coffee and as the harvests of coffee increased per annum, the Rev. Fathers who were initially the sole buyers could no longer buy all the produce. They then advised and encouraged the farmers to carry their produce to Bamenda where they were able to sell it to companies like John Holt and UAC. That encouragement further increased peoples' geographical mobility. To transport the coffee to Bamenda in the 1940s and early 1950s, when there was no motorable road, meant that they needed the services of porters. In 1944, more than fifty carriers transported coffee from Kom to Bamenda.<sup>25</sup> When the road was finally constructed the services of porters were no more relevant. Only the farmers took their coffee to Bamenda.

It was during that era of mobility that the idea of a cooperative was born. According to Kom oral tradition, it was John Mbengli who first contacted the secretary of the Bafut Area cooperative, Fotuba, while selling coffee in Bamenda. That meeting was fruitful not only to him but to the whole Kom. Mr. Fotuba advised him that it was more advantageous to always sell his coffee to the cooperatives instead of selling it to the other people or organisations.<sup>26</sup> John Mbengli did not fully understand the idea of cooperatives, but it was so intriguing that he went to Kom to talk to the coffee farmers about the benefits of selling their produce through the cooperatives. Early in 1952, Mr. Fotuba convinced the coffee farmers to start selling their produce through the Bafut Cooperative Society.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the same year, Kom coffee farmers thought it better to form their own Cooperative society which they called the 'Kom Cooperative Society'. The brains behind the idea of the cooperative were Gabriel Timchia, Sixtus Bas and Patrick Nkwain.<sup>28</sup>

*Table 8.1* List of Presidents of Kom Area Cooperative Union Limited

<i>Name</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>No. of years</i>
Joseph Nkuo Chongwain	18/6/59 to 12/9/60	1 yr 3 months
Mathias Tingum	12/9/60 to 8/4/66	5 yrs 7 months
Joseph Nkuo Chongwain	8/4/66 to 11/2/72	6 yrs 10 months
John Sam Mukong	11/2/72 to 21/8/74	2 yrs 6 months
Joseph Nkuo Chongwain	21/8/74 to 12/8/75	1 year
Joseph Bangha Yong	12/8/75 to 1982	7 years
Francis Chia Ngam	1982 to 1985	4 years

*Source* Kom Area Cooperative Union Limited, 26<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Booklet, 1956-1985, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Interviewed with Nobert Kuma Tosah, 59 years, Buea, 16 October 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Kom Area Cooperative Union Limited, 26 Anniversary Booklet, 1956-1985(mimeograph).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,



*Photo 8.7* The partial view of the building of the Cooperative Union which also houses a coffee mill.

*Source:* Photo by author

The first President of the Kom Cooperative Society was Ferdinand Munteh and Patrick Tim was the secretary. The Kom Cooperative Society soon inspired the formation of affiliated cooperatives with their own officials; most prominent were those in Muloin, Belo, Abuh and Mbam. In 1954 the Kom Cooperative was officially certified by the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Buea, Mr. C. R. Austin, and on 7 November 1959, the Kom Cooperative Society was registered as the Njinikom Cooperative Society for the farmers within the whole of Njinikom.<sup>29</sup> The Njinikom Area Cooperative became the mother of all the ‘satellite’ cooperatives throughout Kom. In 1973, there were thirty satellite cooperative societies in Kom each with its own officials. Thanks to Kuma Nanain and his travels to Nkongsamba, coffee farming was introduced in Kom and helped to transform it.

Between 1959 and 1985, the cooperative produced eight presidents. Table I shows the various presidents of Kom Area Cooperative Union. Their importance lay in the fact that they became another layer among the new social hierarchies.

The objective of the Cooperative was to educate the farmers regarding ‘modern’ ways of cultivating coffee, and most importantly to bring to the disposal of the farmers new technologies of improving coffee production. Thus, fertilizers mechanical equipment for hauling crops, and insecticides could be distributed farmers at affordable prices. The cooperative also promoted savings and the formation of capital amongst themselves. The first people who appropriated these new technologies were John Mbenglii, John Chibu Ngeh, Thomas Mai Attaindum, James Kang, Kimeng Chufii, Andrew Bagha and Joseph Nkou Chongwain. The appropriation of these new technologies further cemented social relations. Not everybody could afford them. Those who could not needed the aid of those who could. By doing so, new relations were created, especially during the harvesting season.

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<sup>29</sup> File Ad/1956 NW Re/2/1 Cooperatives in British Southern Cameroons, 1956 (Bamenda Provincial Archives).

Furthermore, the Kom Cooperative Society housed a coffee mill whose job was to process and transform grade 'B' beans to 'A', which were then exported from Kom. In the process of grading the coffee beans, some were badly damaged. Labour therefore was needed to select out these bad or wounded' seeds from the good ones. That role became the specialty of women, although men too were involved. Between 1959 when the mill went operational to 1985 when the cultivation of coffee dropped significantly because of the failure in world prices of coffee, as many as 3,000 people were employed in these jobs. Such people came from all over Kom. The social lives of these people were further improved as they could now afford to send their children to school, purchase salt, palm oil, clothes and shoes, which were the basic necessities. Again it could be contended that mobility from Kom dropped within those years as job prospects in the area improved.

The introduction of coffee in Kom played an ambivalent role with respect to traditional political elites. First, it was embraced by the traditional elites through Fon Ndi (1926-1954) who encouraged his people to participate in the cultivation of the new crop. Areas that became the hub of cultivating it because of favourable climate and soils were Abuh, Ngwaah and Anyajua. In these areas men married as many as four wives. Whether the new crop was really responsible for this trend cannot be definitively demonstrated, but certainly it can be speculated that farmers needed more family labour for the harvesting and processing of the new crop. Many women also meant many children who helped in the cultivation of coffee. By 1985, most houses in Kom were roofed with zinc. This was suggestive that much wealth had come into Kom through coffee.

The connection between geographical mobility and social change in Kom are nowhere better illustrated than in the case of Kuma Nanain. His contact with Nkongsamba led directly to the development of coffee cultivation in his home region. Coffee growing was to become one of the economic mainstays of Kom. It improved social relations, and of course as Iliffe (1995: 219) for example has noted, it demonstrated that 'migrants could nevertheless be innovators, returning with new crops (...)' Kuma Nanain and a host of other Kom migrants brought many new things in to Kom.

But it could also rightly be argued that sameness was also created over distance, in different geographical places. Kom innovators seized on advances elsewhere to bring to their homes. One simple item was that of zinc, also introduced via Nkongsamba. With the advent of this material, domestic architecture underwent a significant change towards that which was already happening in other regions of the country. Villagers appreciated the qualities of zinc as a durable and versatile material that would withstand the elements better than the traditional grass-thatched roofs of the average dwelling. Zinc came to be a substitute for grass and was known as *akas a Kfaang* ('Zinc of newness'). By the mid-1960s grass-thatched houses were already disappearing, although some could still be seen in the next century. Other innovations of the everyday type that derived from people's experience in 'Nkong' were the new umbrellas (*ghii bwa Kfaang*) and hoes (*fysii Kfaang*). The types of umbrellas normally were made of bamboo, and according to most informants could only be used by one person. The form of umbrella in 'Nkong' was one that allowed two to stand under it. Similarly, hoes made of superior material replaced the old iron hoes that had long been in use. The old hoe was not very durable, and was not easily repaired, partly because of a lack of repairers at the time in Kom.

These new artefacts seemed to have influenced identity construction. People with zinc roofed houses could quickly identify themselves as people who were modern, men of newness compared with those who were still living in grass-thatched houses. That was also true of people who had 'new' umbrellas and hoes. Everyday materiality shifted perceptions of identity, just as the appropriation of these items demonstrated an appreciation for economic and social practicalities.

### Going to the coast (*Itini kfaang*), 1928 - c. 1960s

Kom people migrated for several reasons in the late 1920s, 1930s and the late 1960s. In the case of migration to the Coast, people went for both economic and prestige reasons. According to Roberts (1986: 224), 'by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the pressures of capitalist enterprise had begun to draw most people in Africa along new routes to congregate in new centers of production. The search for wages moved men to cover greater distances on foot and in trucks (...) and work places and plantations became forums for the exchange of new ideas'. Just as with Fuh (2009), who studied youths in Bamenda, Northwest Cameroon, Ali (2007) argued amongst the Muslims of Hyderabad, India that 'Young people who grow up and come of age increasingly expect to migrate internationally in the course of their lives (...) Those who do not attempt to migrate are seen by the community as lazy, un-enterprising and undesirable as potential mates'. Kom people were not very different although some just travelled to make 'appearances' (2009), and show off to people back in Kom that they had been to a very different place from home. Similarly, Kom people went to the Coast to show that their enterprise. These and several other reasons explain why Kom people went to the Coast. The purpose of this section thus is to show how they encountered the Coast and the impact of that encounter on them and eventually on Kom society in general. According to Jerome Ngeh Tim:

The usual appellation of Coast in Kom language was *itini kfaang* meaning the modern down or down of newness. *Kfaang* in those days was just an encounter with the white ways and the whites themselves who came through the sea. The name Coast meant coastline where the ocean meets with the land but at the time it denoted places like Tiko, and Victoria. But the name Coast came to be used generally to mean places like Kumba, Buea, Muyuka, Muyenge, Victoria and Mundoni. All became Coast. In general it only meant going to somewhere more superior than the area of departure. These people went to these areas for many reasons. Some just went for adventurous reasons because they heard interesting stories about the ship and the sea. Stories about the sea were circulated that it used to move in the morning and in the evening it will return with fish. People back at home wondered aloud and in silence how water can move in the morning and return in the evening. If something is water how does it go to the (sic) bush in the morning and comes back in the evening? Those stories were beyond human imagination. Added to these stories was the fact that whenever the water came back, it brought fish that was deposited at the banks. It was too strange for people to understand these stories and so wanted to see for themselves. Those who were privileged to visit the Coast went back with stories about the ship especially the one that was referred to as the launch. These stories provoked adventurous migrations. Besides, those who first came in contact with the sea water referred to it as *salt wata* because it was salty water. Some went down as plantation recruits to work in the various plantations. Some were carried down by their relatives. Some went to work farms in what they called 'two party'<sup>30</sup>; some went to perform household chores and some went to work with the Public Works Department.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Two party' is really a pidgin phrase which means that two people will invest their energies on farming either coffee or cocoa and at the end of the cultivation, they sell their produce and divide the proceeds.

The journey to the Coast was nine days, sometimes ten or eleven days, depending on the part of the Coast concerned. For example, a journey from Kom to Buea, 203 miles, took 16 days. To Kumba it was 153 miles and took 12 days.<sup>31</sup> To Victoria it was 175 miles and took 17 or 18 days.<sup>32</sup> The way Kom people perceived those who had been to the Coast was different. Those who returned from the Coast were seen as having changed in their behaviour, dress and language. They were thus seen by those at home, as those who had gone to the ends of the world and embraced *Kfaang*. And when they returned these migrants saw themselves as a class apart from those who had not travelled out of Kom.

Whenever two people from the Coast met in the village, Tim continues,

their conversation will be something like English but all was confusion. This was to show off and to show that they were from the Coast. The language was at times quite deplorable but the idea was to show that they were from the Coast which was more superior than the village. One will be speaking pure English while the other will be talking pidgin English in any other. They had dresses which people back in the village never had. They also had shoes and soap to wash their dresses.

Shoes attracted particular attention because it was very rare to see a villager with shoes. There were some particular shoes called 2:10 which were bought for £2:10 (he laughs). In those days to have a pound was 'news' therefore if somebody could afford to buy a pair of shoes costing £2:10 he was really a hero. When such people attended public gatherings especially the church they caused attraction by the way they were walking and the noise from the heels of their shoes.

Some were very pretentious. For example, some will buy new underwear like a singlet which was white and then intentionally tear it. In the morning, they put it on and tie a loin. People will look and whisper to each other 'this Coast people could maintain cleanliness. See how somebody will put on a singlet for ages and it is still as white as he bought it. What do they use to wash this type of clothes'. They insisted on cleanliness although most of them came from dirtier places than the village. I personally observed this with some of my relatives. When the 'Coasters' came home it was the practice that they gave out soap to those who visited them. This soap was to be used in washing clothes and the children's clothes. To give soap to somebody was not an easy thing. The soap was usually long and the owner used a box of matches to measure the pieces. There was another soap which was branded with a key. The key indicated cutting point. The key soap was given to people held in high esteem like fiancés or in-laws and other close relatives. The common which was divided using a box of match was given to any passer-by.

If one had a grandmother or mother and gave to her a piece of cloth, she was most grateful. In the night the Coasters went around in the neighbourhoods using a torch which caused a lot of consternation because people had not seen a torch before. In any house that somebody from the Coast entered people wondered what type of fire the torch was carrying which was not hot. Some went around with a radio which was the more embarrassing that people were talking inside a box.

Some went home with rice (*akuni kfaang*) which was a delicacy because it was very scarce. In any case it appeared to me that those who came home created new relations and even reinforced the old ones. For instance, some people will admire those from the Coast and create new relations by washing their clothes or polishing shoes or following them wherever they went. Others depended on the 'Coaster guys' to get modern things like matches, soap, clothes and even shoes. They looked very strange and mysterious too in the way they dressed with shoes, eye glasses, ties, flat hats etc. Some stayed for long without ever coming back home and when they returned their relatives could not recognise them and so started to run away.<sup>33</sup>

This all reveals 'Komness', newness, change and *kfaang*. The wave of Kom migrants to the Coast returned home with stories of the wonders of the Coast and the sea. Their

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<sup>31</sup> Report on the Bamenda Division of the Cameroons Province for the League of Nations by District Officer, W.E. Hunt, 1922 (NAB).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Jerome Ngeh Tim, Moh Road, Nkambe, 14 June 2008.

dress and their speech made them seem ‘superior’ to their kinsmen back at home. What did these *salt wata* and Coastal narratives signify for the minds and encounters of Kom people and the socio-geographical landscape of Kom in general? Their new dress style made them look like mysterious persons to their peers because it was unlike traditional Kom dress style. The new clothes from the Coast led Kom people to call the new dress *dzizi kfaang*, clothes of newness. The returnees themselves had changed in their thinking, sometimes trying to talk a language that they themselves had not mastered well, and behaved differently from local folk, and so represented a new social stratum in Kom.

### The purveyors of *kfaang* and sharing *kfaang* things

From Jerome we gather that the stories from the Coast and the new things which the sojourners brought home encouraged many more people to go to the Coast. Gifts of soap, salt, matches, clothes and other basic necessities, impressed locals. Their ownership was seen as a measure of success and brought returning migrants enhanced status and prestige. The success of an individual was determined by his community and not by the person himself. Therefore the more goods somebody coming from the Coast brought and shared with kith and kin, the more success the community registered in his name. That appeared to be deeply rooted amongst the traditional way of Kom thinking. In the distant past when the geographical mobility of Kom people was to the farmlands of Njinikijem, Mejung, Mejang and Mbueni all farm villages in Kom - people spent weeks and months on the farm. The day of returning was a great success if a person could bring home a basket full of harvest goods and distribute some of the produce among neighbours. Conversely, the person who came home from the farms with an empty basket and had nothing to share with his kinsmen and neighbours was not considered a success by his community. In like manner, hunters were rated in the same way as farmers (Rowlands, 1995 and Warnier, 1993), depending on how much game they brought back from the hunt. These gifts were shared first with very close relatives – uncles, aunts, parents, brothers and sisters – before friends, in order to avoid any potential ill luck or curse. Thus, people shared in *kfaang* in many more ways even if they did not venture out of Kom.

Whether somebody succeeded or failed might depend at what time of the day the migrant returned. Thus, if one arrived in Kom during the night and surprised his neighbours and family, he or she was deemed a success. If one arrived during the day and was seen arriving, one was deemed to have failed. According to many informants, home-coming from the Coast occurred in stages. This explains why most people came in the night.<sup>34</sup> Some, returnees even hid in the bush nearby until nightfall before entering the village. Also home coming from the Coast was generally a special occasion for an extended family to tidy the compound. Once it became known in the morning that somebody from the Coast had returned, the whole neighbourhood gathered to welcome the repatriate. That was not only to get the ‘funkies’ of the Coast.<sup>35</sup> It was also to ask for news about other friends or relatives and to receive mail, especially if the person from the Coast came from a place where relatives or friends were also to be

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Linus Chah, Njinkom, 26 June 2008. He had come home in the night in March 1964 with his brother-in-law William Ful.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

found. Others crowded in to the 'Coaster's house' only to admire somebody who had returned from the Coast as a *kfaang* person.<sup>36</sup> In short, those who had managed to make it to the Coast and then return to Kom with evidence of their success were generally perceived by those in Kom to have changed both mentally and physically, and it seemed that these changes had impacted on development back at home.

Local people were intrigued by the surprise return of migrants from the Coast, but more so by their appearance, 'mystifying and strange because of the way they dressed and appeared'.<sup>37</sup> In the geographical mobility of successful Kom it might be that night-time return held significance, although this topic has not been really covered in the literature of mobility. Most works on migration like Cordell et al. (2000), Whitman (2000), Lambert, (2007), and Martin et al. (2005), have not informed us so. Jerome's claims about the Coastal people's appearance and dress mentioned above, together with their 'glasses, ties, coats and handkerchiefs etc',<sup>38</sup> deepened the impression they made. All of this represented *kfaang* and also showed 'modern conveniences'. But at a deeper level it meant more. Kom people who had never witnessed such dress styles saw the returnees as people who could also bring ill luck to the community. The returnees were seen as '*nyongo*' (Nyamnjoh, 2005: 241-269), because Kom did not understand where people got the money with which to buy such things in so short a time (Ardener, 1960 and Geschiere, 1995).

Ardener (1996: 216) has undertaken research in the Coastal areas of Cameroon where new forms of witchcraft were just emerging. These new forms included the way of dressing, acquiring new things like motor cars, eye glasses and shoes. According to him, such people who amassed such materiality belonged to *nyongo* and that notion was popularly held amongst the Bakweri until the 1950s. By coincidence it was at that time that most Kom people were moving to and from the Coast. Figures show that Kom people's mobility to and from the Coast reached its peak between the mid-1950s and the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> They might have preferred to come home in the night for fear of talk of witchcraft. It could be that they were afraid to end up as victims of witchcraft or to be accused of it. Their dress styles and goods they brought home made them vulnerable to such accusations. Another possible reason was that these returnees brought back modern things like soap, rice, matches, modern cosmetic lotions which had to be limited to the intimate family circle of aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers. It was these people who would be the first to accuse the returnees of baleful influences. They were thus appeased by making them resemble *kfaang* people. The returnees were coming from the cosmopolitan spaces, cities and plantations and may have heard of the stories circulated in the villages about them. Also, by arriving during the night migrants could have learnt at first hand before day break of possible dangers awaiting them.

Migrants returning from the Coast thus were popularly known in Kom as people of newness, *iwul kfaangn*, pl. *Igheli kfaang*. Elsewhere, as in Mali, people with similar mobility experiences constituted what Meillasoux has called 'been to's'. A 'been to' came to mean a person who lived outside Mali, and according to Meillasoux (1971: 130-142) young Malians of the literate class adopted the same respectful attitude towards fellow Africans who had lived and studied in France, especially Paris. How-

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Prince Henry Mbain, Buea Archives, Buea, 18 January 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ngeh, Nkambe, 14 June 2008,

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See CDC Annual Reports between 1955 and 1966 (NAB).



ever, the *salt wata* stories suggest that the stories were spread by people some who had only heard them, and some who had actually been to the Coast. Overall, these stories caused onlookers to regard returnees with esteem and awe. The returnees on the other hand were conscious of their importance and some took advantage of this to elope with men's wives and daughters, who were anxious to see the origin of *kfaang* for themselves. Despite these differences the coastal migrants in their respective villages did not in anyway develop different settlement quarters. Instead, the 'Coasters' integrated themselves in Kom society. The *kfaang* men rather displayed change in their dressing, talking and the way their houses were constructed of zinc and sometimes, stone.

Peter Waindim lived the saga of the journey to the Coast and his experiences were shared in his testimony. His case and his background are relevant because he is typical in his encounter with newness. He is also important because through him we could ascertain how many people migrated to the coast at what point in time. He was born in 1908 and started life as a petty trader buying clay pots and groundnuts from Babungo, a neighbouring chiefdom, and selling them in Belo. His first long distance journey was to Port Harcourt in Nigeria. He also went to Adeima to sell potatoes. He then went to Kombone, Kumba where he experimented with rice farming. He saved some money and used it to buy goats and sold them in Nigeria. He then bought second-hand clothes from Calabar to sell in Tiko and Kumba. Eventually he abandoned the second-hand clothes business and started buying new clothes from Onitsha and Abba in Nigeria. Unsatisfied by this venture he started a kola nut business, buying kola nuts in Kom and selling them at Yola. After the Second World War, in 1949 to be precise, he came back home to Belo and opened a store where he retailed zinc, salt and nails bought from Nkongssamba long before the UAC came to Kom.

I left Kom with my friends, Ndifoyin Awoh and Ngang Chea. Malawa Fuka, Megne, Milibia, Yola Ntu and many others. It took us two days to reach Kubou's compound in Old Town, Bamenda. From Bamenda it took fifteen days to reach Bitoria (sic). We slept at Woyang in Bali; at Bamakwa Sabi and crossed Tang Sabi and spent the night at Fontem junction. From there we stayed at Ngut; Konye. And Kumba. From Kumba we stayed at Mbanga Bakundu; Muyuka; Ekona Benge. From Ekona Benge we passed through Molyko and stayed at Bolifamba. Very early we took off from Bolifamba to Bitoria (Victoria) where I saw the steamer carrying bananas and a plain of water. Victoria was the place which I saw wonders. The steamer was having constant smoke coming out from its head and only steaming. The day it was to go, it made a very large sound which you could hear very far from where it was. The whole sky was dark with smoke. From below the sound was different *ahaang ahaang ahaang ahaang*. This meant that its roots that were deep down were already coming up ready to move. When it was to take off finally, I heard a bass sound *hoooooooooooooug; hoooooooooooooumg; hooooooooooooouung*. At that moment the smoke became thicker and the sky darker while the sea was divided into two parts. It now took off for another world. In fact I wonder aloud and asked myself who on earth could have made such a big thing which could carry all the people from Kom. It was a big surprise to me and looked too big for me. I asked how people get into it. My friends who were already in Bitoria before me, showed how people entered it.

The sea was another surprise to me. The water was salty and so I believed the *salt wata* stories that we used to hear. I asked myself several questions. How a river in a plain could be making noise. We went down to Bictoria in the evening around 4 p.m. and by the time we were just arriving, I heard a loud sound *booo-boooo-boooooo-bboo*. I continued going down with my friends and by the time we finally came out of the forest and looked down I saw wonders. It was quite fresh and a cold wind blew now. I told my other friends that something was going to happen. As we put down our luggage we immediately rushed to the shores of the sea. We stood at the shore and a very dangerous one came now. Water came right up to where we stood and we went running backwards. Canoes too were coming with fish and the people were only dressed in pants. As we were trying to escape for our dear lives one person in the canoe called us to come. We rushed down in great fear and he gave us fresh fish and told us that they have given it because we had helped them in pulling the canoes. At the end of the day we came home with so much fish. The following morning we went back to the shores and

discovered that the sea had moved away depositing fish at the shores which we were picking. I was there at the Coast for eleven months and in December I finally came home and built my house and got married to my first wife.<sup>40</sup>

Many of us were in our group. More than 35 as I can remember. There were porters and traders. Some wanted to work in the plantations and finally some got farmland and remain. The journey actually started at Belo but many other people came from Fundong, Anjin and Muloin and we assembled here before starting the journey.

Our informant provides us with a clue as to how many people actually left Kom at any one time for the Coast. From his story as many as 35 people at a time travelled down to the Coast with divergent ambitions. Some were traders while some were job seekers. We are also informed that not everybody returned home because some acquired farmland and became farmers. This class of people were those who started Kom settlements around the plantations. These areas like Bai-Bikom and Bamugkom are not exclusively made up of the Kom population. But they are dominated by Kom people. Although we are not sure from our informant how many people remained it is evident that those who remained kept close contacts with home. Gradually, they began to participate in home developmental associations.

The experience of our informant with the sea is worth paying attention to. Arriving at Victoria in the evening there is usually a period of high tide. That was a surprise to our informant who has never seen 'a plain of water'. His experiences continue as he informs us about the noise of the waves '*booo-booooo-booooooo-booo*'. That refers to the noisy high tide waves. The story, as it appears from our informant suggests that the waves were very dangerous. In the middle of the sea stood a steamer and people were loading it with bananas.

Indeed, *salt wata* stories become more revealing metaphors. The stories as we have gathered from Peter bring to light the sensations and fascinations of an encounter. Moving salt water brought not only fish but very big sea water vessels with new cargo which workers spent most of the day unloading. Most of those who did the work were from the Bamenda Grasslands where no sea was to be seen (2001). The waves showed that sea water also journeyed. In the morning the waves were usually low and in the evenings during high tides the waves came back depositing fish. The fish represent a metaphor – just as the people had migrated to the Coast and would take home *kfaang* which represents the 'fish'.

After toiling for months and years the people came home with very changed habits. Their language, dress and mode of speaking reflected *kfaang*, just as today many Grasslanders from the United States, Europe, Japan and China talk like European and Asian people. They wear long leather boots and cow boy hats, ear rings and even talk to their parents through interpreters; showing off that they have reached the depths of newness. They also come home with stories about the fascinations and sensations of Europe, America and Asia. These stories include obtaining money from machines and slotting in coins for coffee or food, and many fanciful things like luxurious Porsche cars that are available and cheaper to buy there. Both the people who had been to the Coast and to Europe and beyond constitute hierarchies in that they are more 'endowed with modern opportunities and opportunism than the others' (Nyamnjoh, 2005: 267). We cannot lose sight of the fact that these people, whether in the distant past or recently, re-constituted identities of their own.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview Peter Waindim alias Batacoss, Belo, 27, 28 and 29 September 2008. Also 23, 25 and 26 November 2008.

Going to the Coast was not only limited to the men folk. Women also went. But the difference lay in the fact that most of these women who went down to the Coast did follow their husbands. In this case, it was husbands who determined their mobility. One interesting case, an exception to this rule, was Fuam *kfaang*.

According to people who knew Monica Bih Nange wain Fuam, alias Fuam *kfaang*, was a very daring woman who always believed that whatever a man could do she could do also. She was born in 1935. She never went to school nor did she marry. She violated the norms of Kom society which were not really favourable to the idea of women moving on in their own right. Traditional Kom society viewed a woman as best taking care of the house and the children and also cultivating crops. Fuam is an exception to the rule.

Fuam left Njinikom in 1955 and went to Victoria - a household name at the time in Kom because many *kfaang* people came from there. In 1956 she was employed by CDC at Mabetta palms to work with the maintenance team. After working there for ten years she retired to Kom (1960) after saving some money. While in Kom, Fuam then embarked on the construction of her house with stones. It was a surprise to everybody in Kom - both men and women - that a woman had gone to the Coast and even more that she constructed a house with stone material. What has remained a question which nobody has answered is who the person was who travelled with Fuam to the Coast. When she returned home she was 'new' in her dress and speech, so much so that she was nicknamed 'Fuam *kfaang*'. This simply meant 'Fuam of newness'.

Fuam *kfaang* was the first woman who wore 'modern' dresses in Njinikom and sold beer and 'snuff'. She also acquired land and built a stone house. Fuam advised women when they did not 'dress well'.<sup>41</sup> The local notion that female migrants only had prostitution in mind appears to have been more a figment of imagination than true in most cases (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997: 73-85). Fuam's case has not revealed to us that she was a prostitute.

As the wonders of the Coast were disseminated in market places, kitchens, social gatherings and more recently in drinking parlours, many other people were motivated to go and see these areas. Accounts by travellers have been the root cause of propelling geographical mobility. The first Europeans who came to Africa and returned with stories of the Dark Continent led many other Europeans to visit Africa. Those stories paved the way for European governments to sponsor anthropologists to study African societies.

The photos below reflect some of the personal impact on Kom people that life at the coast induced.

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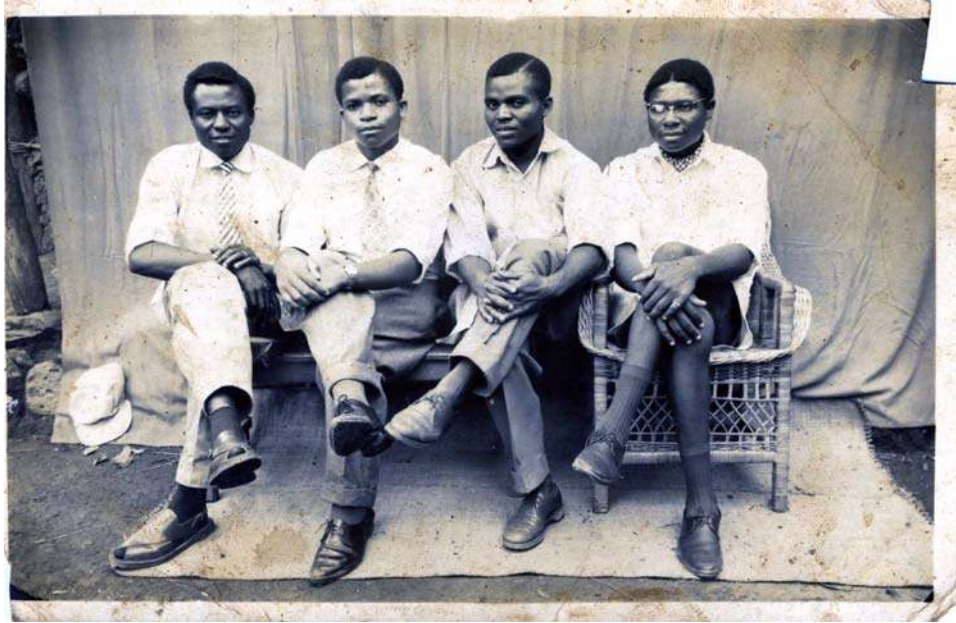
<sup>41</sup> Interview with Francis Kitu Nkwain, Njinikom, 12 January 2009.



*Photo 8.7* Young men displaying *kfaang* both in sitting style, clothes and materiality  
 Source: Fulson's album



*Photo 8.8* A *kfaang* man displaying his *ilung-i-kfaang* radio  
 Source: Fulson's Album



*Photo 8.9* *Kfaang* youths with new postures while seated, and their new hair styles too



*Photo 8.10* Two women of *kfaang* display their *kfaangness*

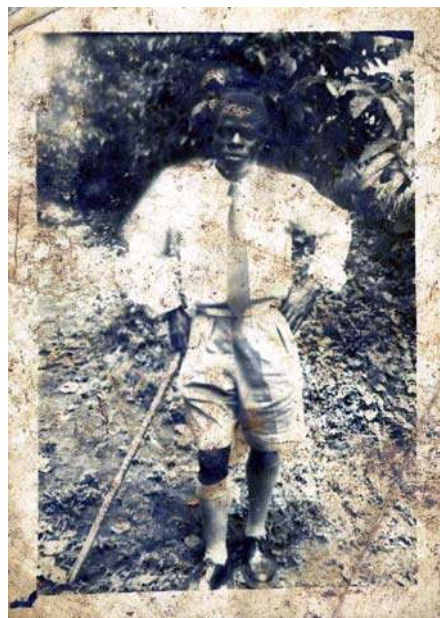


Photo 8.11 New ways of exhibiting *kfaang*

### The Kom-Yola connection

A round trip from Kom to Yola and back took 62 days or approximately two months. In the course of the journey people played specific functions in the caravan. An average caravan was made up of twenty-five to thirty people and included at least twelve boys and sixteen carriers.<sup>42</sup> The boys carried food items, mostly corn flour, firewood and pots. The carriers only carried kola nuts, sometimes as many as five hundred. For security during the journey, the most robust persons carried two spears and two poisonous knives.<sup>43</sup>

The most important commodity traded in Yola was kola nuts. The traders returned to Kom with potassium, onions, matches, towels and beads. One of the people who actively participated in the kola nut business to Yola was Daniel Ayeah Ntu, alias Bobe Yola. He was born around 1910 and became a petty trader buying clay pots at Babungo and selling them in Kom. His first long journey outside Kom was in 1935 when he carried kola nuts to Yola. He consistently went to Yola for the next five years. According to Daniel:

I (he) was one of the first people to sell kolanuts in Yola and that is why I am popularly known as Bobe Yola. It took one month to reach Yola in those days. While at Yola I bought potassium carbonate which was produced at Borno, dadawa and onion which was a spice used in cooking. I also bought clothes which were very expensive. I accompanied Thomas Yai. Whenever we arrived in Yola the Hausas were very happy because, much kolanuts was given to them for free. They took the kolanuts, resold it and bought food which was prepared and kept for more people who came. The Hausa who accommodated us guaranteed our security. I was known by the Hausa chief in Yola. They Hausas also made a lot of gain from the kolanuts that were sold in their compounds. To every 100

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Danial Ayeah Ntu, Belo, Kom, 23 November 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

kolanuts that were counted 5 was for the host. This meant that by the time that the marketing of kolanuts was through the host had at least 500 kolanuts. The journey itself was very difficult as one person had to carry 500 kolanuts. There were young boys whom we went begging from their parents and their job was to carry food and cook while we were on the way. At one time we were more than thirty. At another time we were 50.<sup>44</sup>

Ntu became successful in the kola nut business with Yola and brought back spices to Kom. These spices included onions (*filum fii kfaang*), potassium (*kaangwa kfaang*), and dadawa (*njou kfaang*). The kola nut trade played a very important role in the geographical mobility of Kom people while introducing *kfaang* commodities. Ntu informs us that at one time they were thirty in number and at another they were fifty. That gives us a rough estimate of how many traders were on the way to Yola at any one time. Various studies have been carried out in West Africa by Lovejoy (1980), Cohen (1966), Lynn (1997), Brook (1980), Brook Jr. (1981) and Hogendorn (1976), on the kola nut trade. These scholars have shown how the trade introduced many foreign goods to the area, such as onions, whisky and different clothing. The case of Kom was just one example of an ongoing trade that has been widely recorded elsewhere in West African history.

Ntu saved money through trading, and in the 1940s he became one of the leading traders in second-hand clothes in Kom. He started in Onitsha where he bought second-hand clothes, *dzisi kfaang*, in greater and greater quantities. The old clothing was first brought to Kom by the missionaries in the 1930s mainly for the catechumens who attended morning mass. He claimed that he earned about 100 pounds per annum. For the five years which he was involved in this kind of trading, he must have made at least 500 pounds. With that money, Ntu was able to finance his children and nephews in school. More importantly, he was one of those who introduced the new clothes to Kom in greater quantities. Yet Kom understanding of *kfaang* had a wider meaning than just clothes or similar items.

### Depth and durability of *kfaang*

The encounters which Kom people with distant places like Bamenda, the Coast, Nkongsamba and Yola suggest to us how deep and durable *kfaang* came to be in Kom. For instance, a metal bucket (*Ntòyn-Kfaang*) was a striking example. Before the encounter with the Coast and diasporic places, Kom utilised buckets (*ntoyn*) made of clay which were easily damaged. But with the introduction of buckets made of metal, Kom adopted a new term by calling them *ntoyn kfaang* (bucket of newness). Other items made of new materials provoked a similar response. Spoons commonly known before then as *antass* became *antass-a-kfaang*; soap passed from *a-zsu* to *a-zsu Kfaang*; clothing commonly known as *ndzisi* was termed *ndzisi Kfaang*; matches previously called *a-gwel* became known as *a-gwel-a Kfaang*.

The proximity to the major markets in Nigeria also played a role in the societal transformation of Kom. Much of the new material culture that included clothing (*ndzisi Kfaang*) entered Kom via the traders who went to Yola and Onitsha. After the Second World War, former soldiers became deeply involved in the trade and the importation of second-hand clothes to Kom became their principal activity. The introduction of spices (*ghu fou Kfaang*) and towels (*Bathali*) also came through Nigeria. Interestingly, many

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., interview, 24 and 25 November 2008.

Kom people involved with the trade with Nigeria adopted nicknames associated with Nigeria. Thus, it became fashionable for someone to be known as Bobe Yola or Bobe Batacoss, reflecting town names such as Port Harcourt, Takum and Kano.

Geographical mobility, together with other factors, gave rise to a new culture among the Kom: the culture of *Kfaang* or newness, and progress. Geschiere (1995: 15) has pointed out that ‘every society might appear to be going for modern technology and modern goods meant for consumption but these societies bring along with them specific cultural traits (...)’ New commodities and their consumption generate new patterns of cultural adaptation, just as *kfaang* was an expression of wide-ranging change on several levels among the Kom. Rowlands (1996), Ardener (1996), Warnier (1993), Geschiere (1997), Nyamnjoh (2005) and Fuh (2009) have argued that the Bamenda Grasslanders, like many other Cameroonians, take quickly to modern conveniences or modern forms of consumerism. These writers have documented the appetite and adaptability among the Bamenda Grasslanders that has gone hand-in-hand with the importation of technological novelties and artefacts. Imported commodities translate into symbols of status and thus enhance the prestige of the holder. There is no doubt that Kom people as a result of their geographical mobility and experiences through trade and migration created new cultural and behavioural patterns encapsulated in the very concept of *Kfaang*, and anchored them in Kom.



*Photo 8.12* The photo of a young Kom man in Victoria in 1957. The coat that he wore was known as ‘Tuxedo’ while his shoes were known as 2:10, meaning 2 pounds 10 shillings. This was a fashionable dress to show his *kfaang*-ness.

*Source:* Fulson’s album



The transformations implicit in *Kfaang* have had both positive and negative impacts. Those who had taken this path with the most success, entailing the acquisition of large, well furnished houses with leather chairs, big TVs, chimneys, tile floors, dining tables, indoor plumbing and other modern conveniences, lost something of value in the old Kom heritage. They no longer lived in tightly integrated communities where neighbours were a source of succour and emotional stability. Their children grew up, and some left for Europe or America. To these set of people, *kfaang* was not the kind of progress treasured among their peers. Taken to its logical extreme, *kfaang* could be a source of alienation.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, those who were initially co-opted into the *kfaang* ways and imbibed the *kfaang* ethos did so only within limits. They did not become like the Europeans who claimed to epitomize *kfaang*. Okot p'Bitek (1968: 53 in the *Song of Lawino*) captured that situation in the following words: 'Ostrich plumes differ from chicken feathers; a monkey's tail is different from that of the giraffe; The crocodile's skin is not like the guinea fowl's (...).' These words point to the danger of giving oneself over completely to the fruitless pursuit of that which is not authentic, to the hazards of attempting to straddle two worlds. Nyamnjoh vey recently, although not specifically considering the point, has captured it indirectly in a very perceptive way.

Drawing from Mamdani on the subject and citizen discourse, Nyamnjoh (2010: 10) holds that 'both straddle cultural and civic citizenships, but who would not accept sacrificing either permanently? Sometimes they are more the one than the other and sometimes more the other than the one, but certainly not reducible to either'. In the context of *kfaang* and 'Komness', the symbiotic relationship could be unstable if not contained within limits. Often a *kfaang* person lacked completeness, and wavered by mediating himself between *kfaang* and 'Komness'. Which one was stronger and did a *kfaang* man feel that he had been defeated in his Komness? Depelchin (2005: 19) argues that 'even in defeat there is a place, there are people, there is a culture, there is a core which never fell apart and to which it is always possible to go back in order to recover (...)'. That explains perhaps why Benedicta and many others who had imbibed *kfaang* returned to their beginnings in Kom. Those who found themselves permanently in diasporic places might work hard to maintain 'Komness'.

## Conclusion

This Chapter has attempted to trace the processes through which *kfaang* seemingly came to stay in Kom. The Chapter also reminds us of the extent to which similar social phenomena entailing not altogether different effects can be found elsewhere on the African continent in recent times. Rural-urban migration in Africa and specifically in our region of interest has been studied by scholars like Gugler (1961), Gugler & Geschiere (1998: 309-319), and more recently Nyamnjoh (2009). These scholars have studied in detail the extent to which migrating Africans remained in touch with their villages. In like manner this Chapter has tried to demonstrate how Kom people outside Kom itself, in Bamenda and elsewhere for example, maintained their cultural heritage while residing with friends and kin from home. One significant factor was the effort

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<sup>45</sup> During the fieldwork my observation showed that these type of people were often found alone in their 'castles' only with their closest agnates. Several visits suggested that neighbours hardly ever strolled over to such houses for a chat.

made by traditional authorities, such as the Fon of Kom, to retain and augment the ties that bound the people from Kom to their previous homes.

Such an analysis is quite inadequate, however, if it does not simultaneously consider in detail the great transformations wrought by mobility, interchange and the pervasive influence of 'newness, *kfaang* in the language of Kom, on the agrarian societies of the Bamenda Grasslands. Many of the population of Kom travelled far and wide beyond the boundaries of old. In their interaction with distant geographical spaces such as Nkongsamba, Bamenda, the Coastal Cameroons and Nigeria, Kom were reshaping and redefining the mental maps with which they had set out. Much of what they returned with represented newness or *kfaang* in Kom.

Denis Brown (2006) has recently observed in Caribbean society that returned migrants have re-confronted the socio-economic face of the region. Similar remarks are applicable to the recent social history of Kom. The people of Kom were not unique in their mobility and adaptability. Yet returning expatriates to Kom had also undergone change. Their difference was shown in their identity and the materiality of *kfaang* which accompanied their geographical mobility. Thus, of crucial importance has been the puzzling issue which surrounds the identity of 'Komness'. In the production of place and space especially, Kom people worked hard to maintain their identity, but inevitably underwent their own transformation. Identity as in the case of Kom people demonstrates that it cannot be packaged and folded into one piece, containing both culture and living individual. As deeply rooted as it often was, Kom identity often appears to be fluid and imagined. One group which exemplified this ambivalence was the long-distance traders. Another such can be found in the life histories of those to whom schooling was a transforming process. Both groups ended up as bringers of *kfaang* to Kom. The next chapter presents some of the general conclusions regarding Kom identity in progress.