New Media and Expectations of Social Closeness: The Mobile Phone and Narratives of "Throwing People Away" in Cameroonian Transnational Social Relationships

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NEW MEDIA AND EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIAL CLOSENESS: THE MOBILE PHONE AND NARRATIVES OF "THROWING PEOPLE AWAY" IN CAMEROONIAN TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: In studies on transnationalism, mobile phones have gained prominent attention as tools that maintain relationships in the event of migration. They have transformed transnational sociality from procedural to a daily event all at the control of the actors who, for example, no longer relies on the post office for letters. Mobile phones provide avenues for social closeness and intimacy, impact social identities, facilitate participation in events dis-embedded from a locality, and help in the expression of belonging and solidarity across national borders. Despite these positive facets, the technology could become a source of discomfort as seen in this contribution, which revolves around the unmet expectations of utilising the device to sustain transnational social closeness. Drawn from a multi-sited study conducted among Cameroonians in Germany and Cameroon, the article demonstrates how the consciousness of the possibilities of direct communication negatively influences an actors' interpretation of silences and non-communication. In this context, the technology rather contributes to frustration, uncertainty and disappointments in transnational social bonds.

Keywords: *Mobile phone, Transnational Social Relationships, Expectations, Social Closeness and Discontent, Cameroon, Germany*

Introduction

Accusations that people neglect and distance from relationships among Cameroonians are commonly captured by expressions such as "you did not call me," "he does not call," "they should call," "call me!" These concerns about abandonment take exponential dimensions in

transnational relationships where the absence of national co-location significantly impacts the ways people imagine social closeness and distance. As such, there are symbolic expressions of "throwing people away," which tend to convey the idea that those accused of neglecting ties actually cast away friends and families, who should otherwise be held together through the mobile phone. Expressions of neglect, which occur when people meet face-to-face, during virtual encounters on the internet or mobile phone or through gossips, highlight the importance of the mobile phone as a gateway to the self. They emphasize that it is no longer an excuse for people not to contact others once they share mobile phone numbers; the numbers should be used in locating friends and family members across space and time. It is thus self-evident that the mobile phone should facilitate social bonds when, for example, family members migrate (Madianou and Miller 2011:458-459; Horst 2006:148-150; Tazanu 2012b). Even as some of the accusations are in the form of teasing, the anxieties about abandonment reiterate the consciousness of a perpetual connection to others and also the importance of direct interaction. Just as in other countries, the mobile phone has transformed the way people coordinate and navigate social ties and also how they locate friends and family in Cameroon and across borders (Nyamnjoh 2005; Wilding 2006; Ling and Horst 2011; Hahn and Kibora 2008; Horst and Miller 2006). My interest in this article is to reveal the ways this communication tool, through human agency, shapes expectations of social closeness, influences the ways people interpret social disconnections from partners and how silences and non-communication are interpreted by actors who expect mediated social closeness.

It is argued below that the consciousness of being connected to others, and the knowledge that people are readily available and reachable, influence the way actors experience and interpret disconnections. There is particular attention for the sensory experience or the "feel" of the mobile phone as a tool of social interaction. This "feel" is directly linked to the instantaneity (or the potentiality for this) of communication that defies the geographical location. Questions about the instantaneity of interaction better orientate the aim of the article: How do people interpret unexplained silences, that is, when they are not called? What does the *liveness* possibilities of mobile phone contacts have to do with the accusation that people have changed their identities? What implications do perceptions

of transformed identities have on social ties in the world, where partners are expected to be readily available and reachable? How do actors narrate and compare past co-local sociality with mediated ties? Answers to these questions and many more will reveal that the mobile phone transforms relationships in African societies in ways that require closer investigation.

Beyond the introduction are sub-themes that build on the troubles and expectations of mediated transnational social closeness. The context and methodology come next and are followed by theoretical aspects of the sensory experiences of direct interaction through the mobile phone. Developing from this theoretical base is the argument and narratives that centre on experiences of social distance. This is further corroborated by storylines that draw on previous face-to-face contacts to imagine and idealize what mediated relationships ought to be. The article concludes with a critique on constructivist views of the mobile phone in transnational social fields through the reiteration that the medium has, in this context, negatively impacted Cameroonian social ties across borders.

Context and Methodology

This article draws from multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Freiburg (Germany) and Buea (Cameroon) between April 2009 and February 2010. By this time, it had become normal for Cameroonians to utilize the mobile phone to maintain transnational social ties to the extent that people could not imagine life without the communication tool (for the rapid spread of mobile phone see Nyamnjoh 2004: 80; Nkwi 2009; Jensen 2003: 55; Archambault 2013: 88). Experiences of unmet expectations of mediated social closeness emerged from the fieldwork as a dominant theme, particularly among non-migrants; they decried that migrants, also known as *bushfallers*, keep their distance and do not fully exploit the opportunity of *liveness* embodied in mobile phone communication, i.e., using the possibilities of instant contacts to get in touch regularly. It is necessary to elaborate on the symbolic and cultural meaning of *bushfallers* so as to appropriately situate these expectations of transnational sociality.

In the Anglophone part of Cameroonian, *bushfaller* is a term used to refer to people who migrate to the West in order to "accumulate money

or refine their skills." Their identities are "inspired by international models of success and consumerism" (Jua 2003: 22-23). Most urban youths in Cameroon aspire to the status of *bushfaller* against a backdrop of economic crisis that has reduced the chances of a meaningful livelihood in the country. The appellation is more evident when broken down into its two component words: *bush* and *faller*. *Bush* is used to refer to abroad, most notably Europe and Northern America. *Faller* in this context describes the person who migrates. In the Cameroonian imagination, especially among young people, the *bush* is a virgin farm or forest where opportunities of exploitation are abundant. As such, there is a connection between physical migration and upward socio-economic mobility; the migrants expect to access and exploit fertile pastures abroad in order to be independent, responsible, acquire social status as well as support the family that stays behind (Alpes 2012; Nyamnjoh 2011; Frei 2012; Tazanu 2012b: 206-210). These expectations, together with the realities and the imagination of the physical crossing of borders, have implications for the Cameroonian transnational social field. It impacts the way people imagine privileges and also the ordering and reordering of social relationships maintained through mobile phone.

Understandably, Cameroonian transnational social bonds can be fairly demonstrated this way: it is mainly the migrants' responsibility to nurture the relationships. Although the mobile phone offers possibilities of instant sociality across borders, the socio-economic inequalities (real and imagined) between the actors influence the social practices of the mobile phone in social ties. In concrete terms, *bushfallers* are perceived to be rich and therefore assume or are assigned the responsibility to take care of the social bonds in socio-economic dimensions (Horst 2006; Madianou and Miller 2011; Horst and Miller 2006). Most participants in Freiburg were students with a meagre income and their role in nurturing these relationships is not abnormal in Cameroonian transnational relationships. Historically, Cameroonian migrants, irrespective of their socio-economic status in destination areas, have been held responsible for sustaining ties with the friends and families they leave behind (Ardener et al. 1960; Rowlands 1996: 198; Nyamnjoh 2002: 116; Geschiere and Gugler 1998: 310). This background implicitly situates *bushfallers* as actors who are expected to share their successes achieved in the *bush*, which

inherently means they pay for the cost of maintaining the transnational ties.

Through in-depth face-to-face narrative interviews, participation, observation and group interviews, respondents were asked to describe experiences in using the mobile phone to maintain ties with friends and families in Cameroon (for migrants) and abroad (for non-migrants). A majority of the seventy-four respondents (forty-eight in Buea and twenty-six in Freiburg) at both field sites were between the ages of twenty and thirty. Most respondents who participated in the study in Freiburg were members of *Scratch My Back,* a social group of Anglophone Cameroonians. I became a registered member and hosted some of their meetings. Individual interviews and conversations during the monthly gatherings provided diverse opportunities to understand migrants' responsibilities, challenges of mobility, unmet expectations as well as disappointments and strategies used to navigate the relationships. Respondents and interlocutors in Buea generally expected calls and support from *bushfallers*, including me, the researcher. I was even more seen as an adventurous *bushfaller* than a researcher; a *bushfaller* who would later forget and neglect the relationships developed during fieldwork (see also Sultana 2007:381). As such, non-migrants directed their narratives at me as well as appealed to migrants through me; the migrants should not "throw away" the people back home. The non-migrants' emphasis reiterated the necessity of staying in touch and being close to others once mobile phone numbers had been exchanged, as supported by the sensory experiences of mobile phone communication that come up in the next section.

Mobile Phone Technology and Sensory Experiences

Even though its technological properties continue to change and embrace new dimensions in the political, economic and health sectors, the mobile phone is still the main tool of interaction for people, who are "locationally distant" (Giddens 1990: 18). Developments in smart phone applications have specifically aimed at enhancing social experiences of closeness through instant chats, direct money transfer, an exchange of pictures, calls and even games. Irrespective of the technological developments intended at diversifying the functions of

the mobile phone, one of its peculiar properties as a tool of sociality persists over time especially in Africa. It is the expectation, and sometimes, the compulsion, to stay in touch with friends and families (see also Hahn and Kibora 2008: 89; Horst and Miller 2006: 82). This aspect has fundamentally altered the ways in which people engage in social relationships in terms of perceptions, actions and reactions. In this section of the article, I look at the sensorial appeal of the mobile phone and how this shapes the consciousness of availability and reachability, which in turn contribute to the way people expect to "feel" through the technology.

As a technology of sociality, the mobile phone facilitates instantaneous interaction and a sense of continuous connection to other people (Auslander 2008: 61) by means of live mediation; actors have a feeling of mediated co-presence. This makes it possible for actors to be embedded in friends' and family lives at long distances even as they move independently through space (Moores 2004:30; Couldry 2004: 357). Seen from this angle, the mobile phone is a technology of possibilities, as it provides avenues for social and "affective experience" for actors, who do not necessarily share physical proximity (Auslander 2008: 62). It also allows for "continuous contact" and "continuous mediation" for people who in fact have access to, and share, a common "communication infrastructure" with their partners (Couldry 2004: 357). Our interest here is on what it means to be continuously connected to friends and also how physical absence influences narratives and imaginations of social closeness and distance. The question of what makes the mobile phone and, specifically, mobile phone calls generate a sense of co-presence or feelings of social distance is directly linked to how the technology is "felt."

Mobile phone conversations generate a sense of "intersubjective social experience" (Rettie 2009: 425) during the course of interaction. Actors could even enjoy intimacy in the absence of face-to-face contacts (Wilding 2006). Calls are conducted live and people hear voices that are "sufficiently immediate" (White 2003: 12). A phone call generally replicates the face-to-face medium of speech and is, in fact, an extension of voice over distance (O'Brien 1999: 78). During phone conversations, actors could easily convey or *read* the emotional state of partners based on intonations, hesitations, delays and the spontaneity of the responses. Also, mobile phone conversations allow for dialogic

communication between actors (Tomlinson 2001: 162–163; see also Fortunati 2009: 43), who "spend" valuable time together at long distance. It is also expected that participants pay full attention during phone conversations (Rettie 2009: 425–429; Tomlinson 2001: 163). This in turn contributes to the evaluation of calls as a prised activity in social bonds.

It is partially based on the sensory experiences that mobile phone calls are attractive and valued in Cameroonian mediated social ties. Within the sphere of transnational relationships, the instantaneity of communication and feelings of co-presence is further demonstrated when people query others for not calling, irrespective of whether other avenues of exchanging information and greetings have been used. Mobile phones are pleasing within the Cameroonian context, even as a livelier interaction could ideally be achieved through the Internet (e.g., video chats) but for the fact that it is inconvenient, physically absent and slow. There is also the illiteracy issue, as users of the Internet generally are those who can read and write. Well, the mobile phone is a valued tool of communication as it transmits just the voice; a reason why it is popular in many parts of Africa with high illiteracy rates (see also Ling and Horst 2011). Mobile phone calls are used to evaluate "intimacy, degree of closeness or distance" in social ties in Cameroon (Tazanu 2012b: 67). It is particularly in connection with the intentional deployment of the device to contact others, meaning that calls are purposeful and planned, which demonstrates that callers thought of instantly sharing social space and time with those they call. Basically, the mobile phone numbers directly identify individuals who, in theory, are reachable at any time. Thus, the tool of communication virtually contracts distance by making people available and accessible through these personal identities. All respondents in both Freiburg and Buea more or less affirmed that calls to mobile phone numbers are a direct means of contacting particular people at planned moments. This opinion corroborates the observation by scholars that telephone calls are "strong, active, dynamic and speedy" in their immediate appeal to individuals to pick up calls and socialize there and then (Fortunati 2009: 42).

The mobile phone, through its technological, sensory and social properties, can be regarded as a technology of hope and convergence. It provides avenues for people to "feel" virtual co-presence in the event

of the migration of friends and family members. This positive note on the mobile phone means that it has the potential to either facilitate social closeness or engender feelings of social distance (for people who are not contacted). I argue in the article that unmet expectations to be called influence narratives of "throwing people away" and accusations of the post-migration transformation of identities which, in turn, support another argument that these storylines make it look as if the mobile phone destabilizes most Cameroonian cross-border social bonds.

"Throwing People Away": Experiences of Social Distance and Accusations of Changed Identities

In order to understand the dynamics of friendship and family bonds in the mediated transnational ties, I looked at personal experiences and expectations of social closeness within a setting where the mobile phone facilitates a ready accessibility to partners. The nouns friends and family suggest social proximity of varying degrees in relationships and one would expect the mobile phone to keep these friends and family close in the event of migration. After many months of fieldwork in Freiburg, during which migrants talked enthusiastically about the usefulness of the phone in maintaining ties with family and friends in Cameroon, I had thought respondents in Buea would express similar opinions (Tazanu 2012b; see also Madianou and Miller 2011: 467 about Filipino migrant mothers' enthusiasm). Contrary to this expectation, most non-migrants emphasised the distancing attitude of *bushfallers* with a surprising revelation that they were either never called at all or were contacted only infrequently; whereas they expected regular calls from the migrants. The imagery of "throwing people away," commonly used to describe the neglect of social ties, was invoked to demonstrate the migrants' unwanted attitude, which betrays the mobile phone as a technology that connects and unites people. This means, by default, that the phone has a congregative property as it already binds a collectivity of people in one form or another and not calling others is evaluated as a purposeful rejection. It was a while before I could make sense of the contrary viewpoints expressed at both field sites. In particular, I had a deeper understanding of the migrants' enthusiasm; they were excited about the possibility to directly contact a select number of friends and family members. Additionally, the excitement

of instant sociality was mainly expressed by "old" migrants, that is, those who had earlier experiences of maintaining the relationships through letters and messages sent through the post office and people who travelled across borders.

Experiences and rumours of migrants not keeping in touch with families and friends are highlighted in many accounts, including a group interview with four young men in Buea. One of them expressed emphatically that after about two months of leaving Cameroon, "communication [with migrants] may cease ... and they disappear. They start making false promises when you succeed in getting them." By early January 2010, when the interview was conducted, such narratives of distancing were no longer strange. Other respondents joined in and confirmed that friends in Cameroon might no longer matter to migrants as soon as they began to be successful in their new environment or were making new friends abroad. One of them accused migrants of suffering from the "*bush* [abroad] syndrome" characterised by the neglect of friends, deception, pride, unpredictability, unfulfilled promises and stealth as conveyed in the allegation of *bushfallers* disappearing. Non-migrants interpret disappearances in terms of the migrants' irresponsibility and disinterest in relationships which those left at home. Similar opinions were shared by many people, including Armelle, who described the migrants' distancing as a "*bushfaller* disease." She was a 28-year old university graduate, who wished to migrate out of Cameroon with the assistance of her friend in Germany and a sister in Britain. But these relations were unreliable, partly because "They are different people when they are here [in Cameroon] but become different when they cross the sea." During visits to Cameroon, the friend and sister "pretended" to be close to Armelle, but held their distance as soon they had returned to Europe; they did not call. Most non-migrants such as Armelle were particularly interested in what Wilding (2006: 132) describes as "the fact of communication" as she wished the migrants to constantly rekindle the relationship through calls.

Attempts at "getting them" tell of the struggle in overcoming silences, of a strong desire to (re)connect and be present through the mobile phone. That non-migrants wish for the *bushfallers'* attention is understood within a context where people who expect calls believe they have been "thrown away" or marginalised in a connected world. The

efforts to contact migrants basically demonstrate the ability to use the new communication media to track people and continue relationships if they fail in their responsibility to do so (see also Nyamnjoh 2005: 261–262). Disappearing in the world of the mobile phone is seen as abnormal and goes against expectations of connectivity. It was therefore rational to question why people get lost, when indeed the mobile phone is a sure way of locating partners across space. One of the surest ways to do this was to engage in mobile phone practices such as calling or beeping migrants' phone number in order to ascertain whether the numbers were still in use (see Kriem 2009; Donner 2008; Tazanu 2012b: 69–79 for beeping practices). Some of them also sent e-mails requesting for calls in return. In other words, the fact that they share a common communication infrastructure and, more specifically, that the migrants would likely recognize their numbers and e-mails, made them not doubt their conclusion that the *bushfallers'* were reluctant to keep in touch. John, one of the disappointed young men in Buea, tried unsuccessfully to attract calls from his cousins in Belgium through e-mail requests. The then twenty-four years old was just too aware that his efforts might well just be in vain:

> They promised to call but deceived me all the time. They take advantage of the fact that I do not see them. We were very close before they left. I know they would make excuses and tell lies when they return and we meet face-to-face. They may talk of fake e-mails they sent. They may say they sent information to me through some other person. The e-mails I send to them never bounce back, meaning that they received the e-mails.

Non-migrants understood non-communication within a framework of "changed" *bushfallers*, who are inclined to make "false promises" if they are located. Even as they were aware migrants transformed in part because their "heads are too crowded to think of something else," according to Armelle, respondents in Buea downplayed and dismissed the *bushfallers'* complaint about a busy life abroad. Armelle and others alternatively read the *bushfallers'* claim of a busy life as a false pretext for distancing themselves from relationships and even mockingly challenged migrants to return to Cameroon if they truly experienced a hard life abroad. To them, the existence of the possibilities of direct contacts requires sensitivity and constant awareness of the relationships in Cameroon regardless of the migrants' daily routine.

Such a misconception of life abroad reveals contrary standpoints and different frames of reference for the two categories of actors. While those in Cameroon rely mainly on their imaginations, rumours, stories and media sources, the *bushfallers* have concrete experiences of living abroad (see also Frei 2012/2013; Alpes 2012; Nyamnjoh 2011; Förster 2010; Tazanu 2015). Most non-migrants interpreted a busy life abroad in terms of migrant employment; they are earning money. Aside from honouring remittance obligations, some of the money should be used to pay for calls to Cameroon.

However, migrants' accounts tell of the difficulties of navigating through the demands of daily life abroad amidst the consciousness that they maintain ties with people back home. For example, the daily routine of the then thirty-one year old Andrew offers a glimpse into what self-sponsoring migrant students go through abroad. He got up early in the morning and headed to the university to learn or attend lessons. He returned in the afternoon and had a short rest before going to work in the evening. After detailing his daily activities, Andrew asked resignedly "where is the time?" Just as most migrants, Andrew was conscious of the accusation that he was distancing himself from ties by not calling friends and family as regularly as they expected. He also regretted his inability to nurture ties with certain friends and family (see also Riak Akuei 2005). Unable to convince people about life abroad, Andrew concluded that the non-migrants "do not understand life abroad" or "what we go through here." Thus, beside the consciousness of direct connectivity, the claims of transformed migrants and their supposed unwillingness to stay in touch seem very much related to a misunderstanding that goes with the absence of co-locality (see also Vertovec 2009: 60).

Experiences of social distance are in part fuelled by the tendency to equate availability with the regularity of calls. In the Cameroonian transnational social sphere, non-migrants usually emphasize that frequent mobile phone calls should fill in the communicative gaps, which exist when sociality is disembedded from physical (and national) space. This challenge mostly arises from the consciousness that transnational social relationships could easily be maintained through the mobile phone. Non-migrants' expectations to be called on the one hand and the migrants' inability to regularly acknowledge the relationship contributes to feelings of unease, especially for those

who stay back in Cameroon. Amidst the burden, compulsion and expectation to maintain many ties (see also Horst 2006: 154; Horst and Miller 2006: 87; Madianou and Miller 2011: 466), migrants resorted to scaling down and prioritising the number of people they regularly contact in Cameroon. *Bushfallers* narrowed their ties to immediate families and a few friends. They do this despite the defamation of their names and the negative rumours that swirls around them for not keeping in touch (see Riak Akuei 2005: 9–10; Horst 2006: 155; Wilding 2006: 136 for similar claims about bad names). Andrew purportedly reduced his number of friends to three or four and did:

> ... not keep regular contacts with them, but we keep in touch. My number of friends has reduced. I am the one calling them ... It is becoming very cheap to call [to Germany] from Cameroon. People can call you with as little as 100 FCFA ... People have the mentality that calls should always come from here. But it becomes a burden if you have to call several people, especially friends.

Understandably, it is financially demanding for migrants to maintain relationships with the many friends and family members they have in Cameroon. The process of scaling down the number of people contacted could mean many friends and even family members are left out completely. This practice of narrowing the number of contacts in Cameroon is usually the migrants' decision. It does not usually involve informing people in Cameroon that they have been "thrown away," marginalised or no longer count as friends or family worth maintaining ties with. But the mere fact that these non-migrants still believe they have friends or family members abroad, and more specifically, that they shared phone numbers with *bushfallers* from whom they anticipate to be contacted (Hahn and Kibora 2008: 89), makes it hard for one not to conclude that the mobile phone ownership fuels feelings of social distance in these relationships. In the Cameroonian cross-border mobile phone-mediated relationships, silence is often interpreted from the angle of social distance, even if the social relationships have not experienced any friction (Tazanu 2012b: 268). Many young people in Buea, while claiming that they were not called, furiously showed me migrant friends' numbers to prove the existence of the relationship and thus the expectation to be contacted. Whether the migrants had or still retained the mobile phone numbers of these young men is hard to say, but most migrants

in Freiburg purportedly deleted numbers of people who had become a burden to them.

These opinions on social distance generally suggest that relationships risk breaking up if not groomed through regular calls. In extreme cases, the narratives tended to predict disruption in future face-to-face contacts if calls were not regularly used to rekindle the relationship. But this appeared more a function of the trick of availability magnified by unmet expectations to be contacted. For example, a few migrants narrated experiences of smooth encounters when they accidentally met friends while on holidays in Cameroon. These were friends who had not received calls from the migrants. The narratives of a total break-up of ties further reveal that ownership of new media identities incites sensitivity to cold relationships in the absence of (regular) contacts. Furthermore, the unmet expectations of closeness provoked reflections of previous co-local relationships when the migrants were still in Cameroon. How do some respondents remember earlier face-to-face contacts as judged against the expectations and experiences of the mediated relationships?

Transformations, Idealisation and Reflections of Previous Co-local Ties

Mobile phone researchers have placed considerable interest in exploring different aspects of life in which the device is "implicated." In nearly all studies focusing on social relationships, researchers have reported findings in which the technology is used to fulfil cultural ideals such as mothering (Madianou and Miller 2011; Chib et al. 2014), family bonds (Horst and Miller 2006) and remittances (Tazanu 2012b; Tazanu 2015; Nyamnjoh 2005). Other innovations such as M-health and Mobile Money demonstrate the imaginative appropriation and the tendency of users to harness the technology to their advantage. But it needs to be mentioned that these developments feed social consciousness such that when expectations fail, the imagination might take on negative dimensions as mobile phones, even while enhancing communication, do not necessarily dispel misunderstanding. How do Cameroonians, especially non-migrants, make sense of misunderstandings when they experience unmet hopes in transnational social closeness? In the previous section, the attention

was on narratives and experiences of distancing, which are themselves partly provoked by the expectations of what people think they can do with the mobile phone. Against the backdrop of unmet wishes of uninterrupted communication, most respondents recollected and reflected on past co-local ties, which were said to be cordial. In this section, I argue that a recollection of past social ties is embellished with ideals that are in part influenced by the existence of the mobile phone and, specifically, the expectation that it is utilised to foster intimacy within Cameroonian transnational social relationships.

The previous section has demonstrated how non-migrants and *bushfallers* experience and narrate social distance differently. In fact, one would hardly understand the divergent narratives if two independent studies were conducted, focusing on either the migrants or those who stay behind. For example, beside the cost of sustaining the ties, all migrants reportedly felt the pressure and irritation of direct remittance requests from home. It is a topic I have explored in details elsewhere (Tazanu 2012b: 199-253; Tazanu 2015). Requests for remittances usually contradict the excited intentions of calling "just to keep in touch" (Drew and Chilton 2000) and, to a great extent, contribute to experiences of friction in social ties. Migrants shared many disappointing experiences when calling friends with the excitement to talk, only to hear demands for money. Yet non-migrants were reluctant in admitting that their requests for remittances alienate *bushfallers* and contribute to them being "thrown away." This is not a claim that migrants do not value the mobile phone as a useful tool to coordinate and channel remittances. Yes, they value the mobile phone in this practice and are happy that they can directly call the beneficiary to inform them about the sent financial support, but this is more in connection to those who are entitled to remittances. Rather, the argument is that requests for remittances, a practice done instantly through phone calls nowadays, causes a rift in the ties. The connection between remittance requests and imaginations of previous co-local social bonds is that most non-migrants, who positioned themselves as poor people, believed they were entitled to the successes of the *bushfallers.* Through such positioning and requests, we see how migration transforms relationships as the migrants assume or are assigned responsibilities while non-migrants, some of whom had been responsible and self-sustaining, suddenly express socio-economic vulnerability. This would, for example, mean that migrants

such as the then twenty-four years old Marie, who depended on their parents before migrating to Germany, are reminded by these parents to support them financially:

> Everything changed as soon as I entered the plane. They [parents] look at me as a responsible person. I used to ask them for money before, in order to do my hair or pay for a taxi and things like that, but now they expect me to send them money. It is as if they have no income at all … But I can never complain even though I feel the pain. I now see why some people completely cut ties with their families. The pressure is too much.

All migrants in Freiburg described their experiences with transformed relationships with parents, guardians, siblings and friends. In many cases, the expectations to support the family were not clearly outlined before the *bushfaller* left Cameroon, even though it is generally expected that they remit. But within friendship ties in particular, non-migrants detailed plans and projects they had discussed with the migrants when they were still in Cameroon. Most of these storylines do not only imagine a migrants' success, but indicate that these *bushfallers* withhold support, which they were naturally expected to share (see also Drotbohm 2010; Tazanu 2015). This narrative, and migrants' practices of sharing their successes, is deeply rooted in the history of migration in Cameroon whereby those who move out support the people who stay behind (Brain 1972; Ardener et al. 1960; Ouden 1987). The imaginations of *bushfallers'* "accumulated" money influenced non-migrants to use the mobile phone for requesting remittances when migrants failed in their responsibility to do so. It also meant non-migrants expected potential remitters to call them. Take, for example, the view of the then twenty-three year old Martin, one of my key respondents in Buea. He just graduated from the local university and was uncertain about his future. Migrating out of Cameroon was among his top priorities. Martin had friends in Europe, the USA and South Africa, whom he thought were unwilling to support him. He was particularly disappointed that his best friend failed to keep a promise they made to each other.

> He travelled last year [2009]. I was very close to him … I would not abandon him if I were abroad today. He has my number. At least he should call or even reply to my e-mails. We were always together

and promised to help each other in case any of us has better opportunities ... If I do not tell you that I have a source of income, you need to understand that I need your help. You cannot pretend that you do not know what your friend goes through because you have been in that very situation too [Shaking his head in doubt] ... But life in Europe could be funny. How can someone just stay without contacting friends?

Accordingly, the geopolitical locations of migrants and the imaginings of what they have achieved and, more importantly, the hopes that they share their successes, influence perceptions of the meaning of the mobile phone in these relationships. This also influences accounts and perceptions of being "thrown away." Going by such storylines, previous face-to-face contacts should function as predictors of cordial relationships mediated by the mobile phone without taking into consideration the reality that individual priorities change over time and that people act or react unpredictably in different settings (O'Brien 1999; Donath 1999). By solely expecting words and plans discussed in previous face-to-face interaction to automatically transform into actions and support, non-migrants' expectations can actually be illusions and imaginations filling the gap of silences and non-communication. As to whether Martin's friend was financially able to support him is not known but for the fact that they potentially had access to each other through a shared communication infrastructure made it easy to imagine a rift in the relationship during the period of non-communication. *Bushfallers* were accused of the "*bush* syndrome" or "*bushfaller* disease," primarily based on the simple suspicion that non-migrants were not a priority and were "thrown away" as soon as they (migrants) started experiencing upward socio-economic mobility abroad. This observation concluded that the rich migrants did not want to associate with the poor people they left behind in Cameroon. Stories, rumours and imaginings of a good life abroad but more concretely, migrants' successes displayed in urban Buea—their cars, real estate investments, spaces of leisure, indulgence in bodily pleasure, etc, all prove that these *bushfallers* are successful and unwilling to share their success. Respondents in Buea, who thought that the phone offers a direct avenue to channel remittances, decried that migrants "waste" money in unnecessary displays and consumption when they visit Cameroon (Tazanu 2012a:107–114; Riccio 2005; Bourdieu 2002: 374–375).

When one includes the accounts of migrants, a different picture is obtained of the ways social ties are expected to be and, more importantly, what one could regard as perceptions on resource sharing. Unlike non-migrants, the *bushfallers* are expected to account for how they expend theirearnings. As mentioned earlier, media practices such as calls and beeps are used to question *bushfallers* on what they do with their money. Non-migrants such as Martin vehemently believed migrants have to share their resources and even tended to paint a picture of a relationship where financial resources in the pre-migration period were collective. But this seemed to be an exaggerated evaluation of the social bonds. Migrants even contested such a viewpoint as one could hear them express "you cannot just give money to people as though it is free," or "we do not harvest money on trees." Beyond these expressions is the reality that people, be they migrants or not, often retain their income although they may share some of their earnings once in a while. Evidently, even as experiences of life abroad could influence migrants to scrutinize certain values they share with non-migrants (see also Eriksen 2007: 4), the suspicion that the *bushfallers'* upward socio-economic mobility significantly distorts their perception of collective resource ownership appear to be exaggerated.

It, however, remains engrained in the minds of most non-migrants that *bushfallers* withhold and waste resources that should "normally" be transferred to non-migrants in order to rekindle social bonds. Non-migrants were not hesitant in seeking further explanations for their disappointments in cold social bonds. In particular, some of them sought answers by evaluating what they believed to be the lifestyle of Europeans (or Westerners) and how this in turn reforms Cameroonian migrants to be selfish. They referred to individualism, usually attributed to the Western way of life, as contributing to their experiences of being "thrown away." Western individualism was contrasted to "African values" characterised by other-oriented social ties. The claim of African values and the readiness to maintain social ties at all costs was vividly expressed by the then twenty-three years old Laura, a mobile phone call operator in Buea. She emphasised that "...Africans are welcoming, social and friendly. Since I am an African, I will always want to maintain my friendship with other people." Thus, experiences of silences and non-communication through the mobile phone actually contribute to uncovering narratives about African and Western sociality. In these accounts, the African

sociality, whatever it is, is deemed superior compared to the degraded European way of managing social relations. It is therefore surprising that Africans stay silent in a world where the mobile phone could be used to easily communicate or express the African lively nature. Just as most respondents in Cameroon, Laura intended to pass a message to migrants (through me) that they should not embrace the Western lifestyle of not talking; it was intrinsic for Africans to talk. The African, who is "welcoming, social and friendly," should express these values through regular mobile phone calls:

> I hear people who stay in Europe do not even know their neighbours. They do not talk. That is very strange. We expect that our people living in such an environment should feel lonely and must therefore call back home ... How do they [migrants] feel when they do not talk as we do here? I can't go a day without talking. That is the bad side of Europe ... Our people must not copy that kind of lifestyle because we are different. We like to talk and also to be together.

This is an interesting perspective on African sociality, which tends to erroneously suggest that certain practices are either intrinsically African or Western irrespective of the context. In other words, if (many) Cameroonians are not satisfactorily maintaining relationships, as revealed in my study (see also Drotbohm 2010; Nyamnoh 2005), why continue to stress the assumption that Africans like to keep ties when in reality a look at the ongoing global and local trends and realities, such as the migrants' inability to afford the cost of calling friends, offer a better understanding of the state of the relationship? It sounds essentialist when claims are made about this distorted reality that intentionally aim at glorifying the "African culture." Going by the opinions of non-migrants, one is tempted to conclude that it is only when Africans migrate to Europe that they imbibe individualism and a discontinuation of social ties. This aside, non-migrants constructed a fictive impression of egalitarianism and gratuitous depletion of their resources if they were economically viable to maintain the ties. Expressions such as "we are poor," "we in Africa have nothing," and "I would call if I had money," all aimed at positioning themselves as economically weak partners, who are committed to the "African value" of keeping ties at all costs.

If one were to adhere seriously to these claimed glorious African values, it would imply that hospitality and understanding is sought in relationships despite all too common challenges in long distant relationships. But a deeper look at actions and inactions of the actors apparently reveal the betrayal of the reified African values. A few examples, all centred on instant requests for money, illuminate this. We are left to question if it is an African value that most non-migrants pressure migrants to remit and could even tend to insult or belittle migrants when their demands are not met (Tazanu 2015). Many migrants in Freiburg even evaluated their relationships with non-migrants in terms of monetary support, that is, they were seen more as "wallets on legs" according to Francis Nyamnjoh (Nyamnjoh 2005: 244). Some of them were no longer contacted once they were found unable or unwilling to answer requests for remittances. Furthermore, most *bushfallers* accused non-migrants of rudeness when they (non-migrants) did not even have the courtesy to call and thank the migrant who sent them money. Based on these few examples, we could thus ask if the positive assertion of African readiness to keep ties at all costs is genuine or just a indication of ulterior motives. Interestingly, non-migrants do not believe their actions and inactions contribute to silences and non-communication, which in turn accounts for cold ties that could easily be maintained through the phone.

By not treating relationships with the attention they deserve, the migrants' insensitivity was described as threatening the very foundation of African solidarity, which the mobile phone is expected to preserve. There is plenty of evidence that migrants, the main caretakers of these ties, feel the burden of instantaneous communication, which is why most respondents including Andrew engaged in what I called elsewhere shallow relationships that develop out of a shallow sociality (Tazanu 2012b: 210). By this, I mean a furtive type of mediated interaction in which the actors responsible for nurturing the ties fear asking questions that could generate intimacy. In fact, the fear of intimacy, and the consciousness of the fear of intimate ties, emerged as one of the main themes in my research (see also Wilding 2006). While *bushfallers* are interested in shallow intimacy when they foresee burdens, non-migrants who sense such attempts at creating gaps in social ties find ways to scold migrants for attempting to silence or destroy family relationships. As such one hears expressions of disappointment in Buea. such as "a family is a family," "you cannot

run away from your family," "he may run, but he will still come and meet us here." etc. These normative statements reiterate the centrality of the family and demonstrate the ongoing consciousness of the possibility of direct communication across borders; a consciousness that is in part shaped by the possibility of using the mobile phone for holding people together.

From the storylines above, we see that the actors read connectivity, silences and non-communication as intentional acts. Social distance seems to be magnified by the consciousness of instant connectivity. Of course, as a technology, the mobile phone potentially enhances direct communication but it does not necessarily guarantee the quality of relationships. Through the experiences of silences, disconnections, attempts to disconnect and perceptions of changed identities, we see how the mobile phone in this context embeds uncomfortably in Cameroonian transnational social ties. Most respondents in Buea expected the *nowness* of mobile phone communication to be exploited frequently by migrants simply because they knew they could easily be located across space and time. The stance of these respondents tended to even neglect the reality that calls "cannot bridge all gaps of information and expression endemic to long-distance separation" (Vertovec 2009: 60).

Conclusion

That so much can be said about silences, disappearances, frustration and discontents in social relationships, when a simple portable device is not (frequently) used as much as expected, tells just of how deep the mobile phone has entwined itself in the life of the users. And it seems to have come to stay in that other communication technologies are using the phone as one of the central access points of social life, of political participation, health and mobile money (which is very advanced in the case of East Africa). The technology has found a place in the daily life of users as it has been integrated into "inconsequential," "tiny" and "trivial" routines (Arminen 2007: 431). Although it is no longer totally new, especially if we consider that there is a generation of people who have used the technology all their lives, the one enduring sensory dimension of this tool of interaction is the expectation of sociality. It has not been my intention to reduce

Cameroonian transnational mediated relationships to disappearances, non-communication, silences and uncomfortable encounters, as there are success stories of people who use the mobile phone for solidarity purposes, the expression of belonging and their participation in family life from abroad. By focusing on the disruptive dimensions of the mobile phone, this research contributes to research findings that highlight the unexpected significance of technologies in society. A stress on the disjuncture between the expectations and realities of the mediated ties does not necessarily mean the relationships are "ungovernable" through the mobile phone. Rather, what I seek to portray is that the consciousness and possibility of instant interaction embodied in mobile phones has engendered a degree of uncertainty in Cameroonian transnational social relationships as evidenced in narratives of silences and disappearances amidst unmet expectations of (regular) phone calls. Thus, the mobile phone, through its expectations of instant sociality, does not necessarily lead to social order or make people happy (Couldry and McCarthy 2004: 3) even as it offers new possibilities.

It is generally theorised that migrants and non-migrants positively construct transnational social fields by using media such as mobile phones. This technology is perceived as constructive as it facilitates the easy binding of transnational relationships. Findings in this article, however, reveal the destructive dimensions of the medium in Cameroonian cross-border social ties. We thus have to understand the significance of global technology, such as the mobile phone, as not having a unidirectional effect on all actors (Werbner 2002: 1; Nyamnjoh 2004: 64). In concrete terms, it leads to specific local experiences in different cultures and settings. Its appropriation and significance cannot fully be understood without referring to actors within a particular culture. Without taking this into consideration, as has been shown in the Cameroonian transnational social field, we could miss vital realities if we assume that cross-border social bonds are easily maintained simply because partners are readily available and reachable. By solely assuming the impact of the media we could erroneously conclude that friends and families interact through the mobile phone on equal terms. While it is true that the phone offers a platform for easily maintaining relationships, there is also the reality of inequalities, the most obvious being financial inequality or the unequal abilities to pay for the costs of sociality. The research

has revealed respondents' narratives, expectations, imaginations and media practices as deeply embedded within financial and power inequalities inherent in their social ties. The disparities are themselves underpinned by the participants' location within national and economic spaces and the association of these spaces with well-being and capabilities. In other words, the physical locations of actors are fairly translated into their real or imagined economic stamina. These imaginations and inequalities have led to informal "arrangements" on how the mobile phone should be deployed for transnational sociality. But the narratives of "throwing people away," revealed in this article, demonstrate that the "arrangement" that *bushfallers* maintain social ties is contributing to the unmet expectations of social closeness and to feelings of destabilised relationships.

From my understanding, the mobile phone has radically influenced the way Cameroonians perceive social ties and how they relate to each other across borders. Media practices and narratives tend to suggest that mediated social closeness should not only replicate previous face-to-face contacts, but also that social ties move towards a certain level of perfection. In describing the unmet expectations of the mobile phone in their relationships, respondents often painted a picture of a shared past in which face-to-face contacts were almost problem-free. This means that the present mediated relationships as judged against the ideal past should be strong, healthy and uninterrupted. My view is that this idealistic and exaggerated "deification" of the past is directly linked to the disappointments of unmet expectations of the possibilities associated with the instantaneity of connectivity. The findings demonstrate that mobile phones open up possibilities, which, according to respondents' accounts, could be treacherous, uncertain and destabilising, as demonstrated in the unmet expectations of social closeness embodied in such feelings as being "thrown away."

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