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ASSEMBLÉE GÉNÉRALE
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Creating African Futures in an Era of Global Transformations:

Créer l'Afrique de demain dans un contexte de transformations mondialisées :

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بعث أفريقيا الغد في سياق التحولات المعولمة :

Belonging away from Home: Building Community and Virtual Intimacies amongst Frontier Pinyin Migrants in Cape Town and Cameroon



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Introduction

To be mobile in Africa is assume, enhance and maintain complex relationships to places, spaces, people and various forms of sociality. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are practical toolkits in the fulfilment of such aspirations and expectations. Mobile frontier Africans use ICTs to participate and belong to multiple places simultaneously. This paper takes a closer look at one such mode of participation and belonging – ‘home village’ associations – the continuation and maintenance of which by and among the Pinyin migrant community of Cameroonians in Cape Town is significantly facilitated by ICTs. Focusing on Pinyin Family Meeting (PIFAM) that represents the Pinyin Community in Cape Town and the Pinyin News Forum (PNF) that is an Internet-mediated virtual forum/association and the Pinyin Development Organisation (PDO) the ‘mother association’ in the home country, this paper looks at how as frontier people PIFAM, PNF and PDO have appropriated ICTs to enable the organisation of development projects in the home village and to give a voice to local and international migrants to discuss and have a say in village and cultural politics and participate in development projects. They serve as powerful vehicles for the mobilisation of resources through levies on their members or lobbying for state resources, in order to promote the ‘development’ of their home villages (Eyoh, 1999: 291). The paper shows how these frontier people have been able to harness an organisation for development that is very common in the Grassfields of Cameroon and to the Pinyin people, in particular. Owing to their appropriation of ICTs, they use these frontier positions to play a leadership role in these associations in remarkable ways. The paper argues that migrants’ connectivity, virtual presence and integration to the home village is mediated and managed through associations and Internet-mediated forums that give migrants the possibility to express their hybrid identities (a notion of self that is neither wholly of the home country nor exclusively reflective of the host country) and to negotiate their identity and belonging. This identity is often expressed through the various socio-economic and human development projects that migrants sponsor financially that foster growth in the home village. As such, information and home village associations cross borders as never before. ICTs thus becomes a critical variable that channel information towards home village development, ideological debates, (enhanced by internet-mediated spheres) towards restitution of traditional values and mobilise groups towards socio-economic development in the home village (Brinkerhoff 2009), and welfare of PIFAM members. Concomitantly, increased mobilities and advances in communication technologies are fast changing the urban-rural settings of home village association to one of virtual and physical associations that ‘bridge-to-bond’ migrants towards a common goal of home village development, as they are connected by a shared identity. This presupposes that ICTs does not exist in isolation, but are employed by migrants in a normal social life and sociality. PIFAM, PNF and PDO thus show how migrants draw on aspects of ICTs that fit into their daily lives in subtle, yet effective ways. Through Pinyin News Forum (PNF) members connect with home-based associations (translocal elites) diasporic members of PIFAM and Pinyin Development Organisation (PDO) to ‘express a transnational ethno-





territorial relationship that can be imagined as a network shaped like an intercontinental spider's web connecting the home with its national, international and virtual chapters' (Mercer *et al.* 2008: 9). As a concrete and virtual association, they are connected to a place (Pinyin) – home village. This connection is made possible by the new communication technologies and access to the Internet as well as migrants' mobile and transnational ability that have increased migrants' 'connected presence' (Licoppe 2004) to the home village through online communities/physical structures to foster socio-economic and cultural development. In this regard, associations have been given the 'ability to negotiate their belonging and identity and maintain psychological links to the cultural identity of their homeland' (Brinkerhoff 2009: 13; Mercer *et al.*).

Through the internet-mediated forum of PNF, Pinyins provide communal responses towards village development and modernisation thanks to the migrant and diasporan communities who initiate development projects given their role as frontier people. These associations bind together individuals from across socioeconomic stations and in spaces far away from their ancestral communities by appropriating ICTs as the bridge that links the associations together.

In this regard, this paper seeks to find out the following: what is the role of ICTs in associational formation and cohesion and how does ICTs contribute to the outcomes of potential manifestations in host and homelands? What is the role of the home-village association in the sociocultural life of its members and how do these identities sustain continuous loyalty to the home village? How do these communities mobilise collective action towards the home village?

As argued by Feldman-Savelsberg & Ndongo (2010: 374), belonging to ethnic associations draws on a combination of primordial, performative, strategic and reactive identities. This is because, quite often, migrants are reduced to the margins of the host society with less room for integration than tolerance (Nyamnjoh, 2011). Village associations thus become a platform for migrants to regain their personhood/dignity and a useful space in upholding the values of the home country as much as it gives a voice to the silent migrant. Following Das & Poole (2004: 9; see also de Bruijn *et al.*, 2009: 12), marginalisation is conceived here as marginal population and location (Pinyin and margins in the host society) "formed of 'indigenous' or 'natural' subjects, who are considered to be foundational to particular national identities and excluded from these same identities by sorts of disciplinary knowledge that mark them as racially and civilisationally 'other'". This concept of margins suggests the notion of margins that can be summarised by a simple story of exclusion and how the people discussed in this chapter through other forms of intersubjectivity and social and online organisation seek to counter these forms of marginalisation. However, as argued by Powell in her case study (2014) the appropriation of ICTs by marginal groups have provided a conduit for the marginalized to negotiate some of the marginalities that govern their lives, and by extension their cultural and physical geographies as I examine in the case of Pinyin migrants.





Context

The Pinyin people belong to one of ethnic groups in the Bamenda Grassfields of North West Region of Cameroon; about 60km south east of the Regional capital of Bamenda. Despite its proximity to the Regional capital, the village is still geographically marginalised in terms of socio-economic development and the topography that is hilly and rugged hence forestalls development. It is in this light that the Pinyin people have formed associations (local, international and virtual) to seek to redress this marginality by providing basic amenities such as electricity, roads, water and building and furnishing of public schools created by the government. Their action is guided by the notion of belonging to the home village – their ancestral land as well as the pride that one garners as an active member in village development. The different associations are linked to the Pinyin Development Organisation (PDO), which is the ‘mother’ association in the home country that informs local and international migrants about development projects and coordinates the execution of the projects. PIFAM and PDO in this regard are the concrete associations while PNF is the virtual association; all working towards a common goal of village development. Through these various associations Pinyin migrants and diasporas have defied geographic boundaries and placed themselves at the fore as frontier people (Kopytoff, 1987), in order to mitigate and negotiate the various forms of marginality (social, economic, geographic and belonging) that inhibits self-development and consequently development in the home village. However, this coordinated action is made possible through the different use of ICTs to achieve their goals.

PIFAM is composed of migrants (old and young) who make their way to Cape Town thanks to chain migration; aided by relations who have settled there before. Most of them come as economic migrants and double as students. Most arrive in Cape Town as legal migrants, then seek asylum, turning them to refugees because of the advantages they stand to benefit being refugees (pay for university education and medical fees as locals, and involvement in informal economy). After education they seek employment under the critical skill Act. Despite their hustling nature, these migrants tend to be committed to the association and the home village.

The formation of village associations of Pinyin migrants can be traced back to the period of inter-village weekly trading¹ and they were further developed by bush trade to neighbouring countries as migrants often travel in clusters. Taking after this tradition as frontier people, migrants organise themselves into groups that reminiscent home and to protect their interest in far off villages out of home. Compared to the past, advances in communication technologies have enhanced connectivity for migrants with the home village and amongst the diaspora community. These associations have sought to become an enlarged group of PIFAM, PDO and PNF irrespective of boundaries as a result of the evolution in communication technology and wide access to the Internet that permeates and creates a ‘gel-like character of

¹ A period when traders travel from one weekly market to another buying and selling goods. Away from home they formed associations where they saved their weekly earnings.





contemporary communicational settings’ (Sheller 2004: 47), thus creating ‘coupling and decoupling’. This presupposes that ‘place’/home is not bounded but is instead fluid given home is not a very fixed geographical term because migrants do contribute to development of themselves in Cape Town and to the home village (see also Mercer *et al.* (2008: 6; 2009: 143). Home as such is larger than the geographical location of Pinyin given the extensive development that is done to themselves. Hence to confine home only to Pinyin is to limit the full extent of their contribution.

Drawing on Wilson (1995), I examine the communal message, announcements and messages that support democratic values, which form the bulk of what is posted on the forum. As agents of development associations are coordinated by communal messages that are widely disseminated. Through these communal messages, I examine the Internet as a tool for maintaining and upholding home village identity. Lastly I examine forums as spaces for virtual punches. In the subsequent paragraphs I give an overview of PIFAM and a synopsis of methodology.

Overview and Characteristics of PIFAM

The general assembly of PIFAM is the body that represents all registered Pinyins in Cape Town and non-Pinyin who choose to become members of the group. Membership of non-Pinyin in the association means navigating between their ethnic identity as well as that of Pinyin and such members are accorded full rights and benefits like any other Pinyin member. This means that while collective identity is emphasised as a marker of belonging to home village associations, it is not often the prerequisite rather, hybrid identity and I add collective ideology accounts for belonging. Identity and ideology thus become the fundamental issues of associations. Although migrants base their identity on a shared association with the home village/home country, there is a great propensity towards hybrid identity or cultural hybridisation (Friedman 1994). This is evidently so because identities are negotiated, constantly produced and reproduced as a result of the lived experiences in the host country and the home village. As maintained by Friedman (1994: 28) identities are a “negotiated result rather than a reflection of an objective or described reality”.

PIFAM was set up in 1999 by six founding members and celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2009. The group is currently expanding and has 115 registered members due to chain migration and kinship relations. As a result of its growth, sub-associations of members from various quarters in Pinyin have been formed, with PIFAM being the ‘mother’ association. There are five sub-associations, meaning that there is hardly a quarter in the village that is not represented in Cape Town. While these different structures mitigate marginality as much as it enhances collective identity and belonging, giving room for small association to be in touch with their respective quarters in the village and to communicate with the elders to provide needed development. Although based in Cape Town (also in Johannesburg), PIFAM is an affiliate to the PDO based in the home country which is the body that informs and oversees





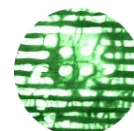
development project in the home village. PIFAM members are also affiliated to PNF; an online virtual association where members participate in on line discussions.

The aim of these associations is to unite Pinyin members, provide welfare and economic assistance to member, and promote the cultural values of their home village and serves as a platform for members to ‘engage with others and explore their community cultural identity and development’ (Brinkerhoff 2009: 37).

One major activity of PIFAM is a weekly rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA) that is commonly referred to as a *njangi* (Rowlands 1995; Niger-Thomas 1995). Weekly *njangi* contributions start from R 250. Members are not expected to come with the money at meeting sessions. Rather contributions to the beneficiary are done via Internet/cell phone banking and members come to meetings with receipt as proof of payment. Such novelty of contributing to *njangi* is part of the advantages of appropriating ICTs in the daily lives of migrants.

As frontier people, one of PIFAM’s preoccupations is the developmental role it plays at home by channelling assistance through the PNF to PDO – members respond to calls for assistance via PNF and then channel their contributions to PDO. It has equally provided reasons for sub-associations to be more relevant and work collaboratively with elites and parents in their respective quarters to provide funding for projects that enhance the quality of life of those at home. For instance, each quarter is responsible for the provision of potable water as well as electrifying its quarter after the main high-tension cable was installed. This means that local and international migrants are informed of such collective action and levies via the Internet (PNF). According to Reynolds (2009: 210-11; Evans 2010; Mercer *et al.* 2008), such efforts create new groups and maintain existing networks that allow for these deterritorialised communities to live spatially, yet still connected to the home village. As migrants, the tendency is to be mobile with their habitus and connections that belong with the body in motion (Warnier, 2009: 419). Associational formation thus is integral to their mobility and migrants seek to build on it in their new locus. Associational formation intensifies belonging, virtual communication towards the common goal of village development. The home village thus becomes the locus of focus and concern despite being in Cape Town because they want to continuously internalise basic values and their orientation towards the home village, which continues to be their point of reference (Trager 1998).

In a similar intellectual trajectory Brinkerhoff (2009: 37) alludes to cultural identity benefit that expounds on the need for members to relate with others to “explore and negotiate their individual, as well a community cultural identities”. In the same vein, as I have argued elsewhere (Nyamnjoh, 2014) there is also a psychological benefit that creates an emotional wellness and sense of belonging: a sense of having an insurance policy in wealth in people. It is in this light that Kastoryano (1999: 193 cited in Brinkerhoff 2009: 39) maintains that these associations can be a “shelter, sometimes a sanctuary, where culture religion, ethnicity, and





nation are interpreted, redefined, and internalized”. Bonding social capital and bond-to-bridge social capitals provide thus a platform for the above benefits to be fully realised amongst migrant and diasporan mobiles. The ripple effect is that these bonds counter different forms of marginalisation by giving them a sense of self-esteem, belonging and community.

Literature and methodology

Attending PIFAM meetings and other activities was key to understanding the everyday workings of the association. It also shows how these meetings are organised with the help of the mobile phone through the calls and SMS that are sent out to members announcing venue, time and levy in the case of an occasion. In conjunction to interviews of selected informants and (most of) the executives in both groups, I equally participated in various social and cultural events, attended wakes, birthdays and born houses (celebrations to mark the birth of a child), sporting events and parties, thus marking joyous and more solemn occasions. Unable to subscribe to the PNF virtual communication network, I relied on other informants to forward circulated emails and thanks to most informants I followed the discussions via the forwarded mails. These discussions have informed my analyses. Telephone conversations were inextricably linked to this section as I made frequent calls to negotiate interview sessions and to find out more information. I also received forwarded SMSs sent to circulate information amongst PIFAM members. Interviews were conducted with home-based leaders, village elders as well as His Majesty the paramount ruler of Pinyin. Interviews in Pinyin (Cameroon) often shed light on on-going discussions in the forums. These interviews give insights into what is expected of migrant community by those in the village and how the development projects carried out are coordinated from home by ‘translocal elites’ (Comoroff & Comoroff 1993).

The study of (elite) associations and the theories developed around them, especially those conceived of in the colonial period and its aftermath (Nkwi 2011; Delancey 1988; Rowlands 1992) and in the late 1990s, are based on the existence of elite in combination with a group of persons – associations. These persons are endowed with social power and a religious, political, ideological or cultural value that is transcendental to the social organisation (Naville 1963). The associations were also associated with mobility between regions and the home village. Such associations tend to originate from those outside the village, given its importance to those living in the cities and wanting to reconnect with the village (Gugler 1971, 1997). Whereas associations then was the mechanism that those in the cities and the old in the village use to safeguard their hegemonic powers and to get hold of and have control over others, today migrants are linking home because of the prestige of being associated with home village development. They increasingly tend to be mobile with their bodily techniques, which has been enhanced by ICTs, harnessing opportunities to develop the village front. It is this art of being ‘mobile with’ that puts them at the fore front, linking home and host country.





New-found wealth by migrants is challenging traditional elitism and the hierarchy through the ‘reinvention of hierarchy’ as a result of an entrepreneurial ethos that informs mobility. Today, the emergence of transnational studies has put migrants and home associations on a par and at the fore of home-village/rural-urban connections with a focus on development. With a new mutually interdependent relationship reinforced by the development of social and kinship ties, coordinating and equipping the local high school, electrification, provision of portable water and the roofing of the church in Pinyin was successful owing to the adoption of ICTs, especially the Internet and mobile phone. The associations are normally agents of development but increasingly with the mobility and frontier position of the Pinyin migrants, they are able to harness opportunities away from home for home, as well as being able to draw from home to develop themselves abroad.

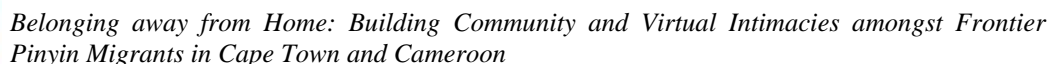
While the salient themes of mobility, rural-urban linkage, power and elite formation that underscored the studies during the 1990s are still present today amongst migrant communities, the current tendency is an increased focus on development (Mercer *et al.* 2008; Mercer & Page 2010; Evans 2010). Improved communication technologies and networks as well as the transnational lifestyle – the double engagement of mobiles have seen the pursuance of a development agenda to its logical conclusion. Connections back home are informed less by the fear of witchcraft than by ‘moral conviviality’ (Mercer & Page 2010), moral duty and prestige that is associated with village development and also the fear of bad mouthing as an unpatriotic member of the community.

The coming of information and communication technology, improved roads and air transport have ushered in increased connectivity with home-village and other associational networks in unprecedented levels. Such connectivity is further strengthened as a result of they being imaginatively Pinyin reflecting the socio-historical structures of the societies they represent as frontier people (Trager 1998). Members therefore organise themselves following patterns of strong sentiments and mental pictures to undertake their cultural practices. The felt need to express a common identity triggers ‘communities of memory’ that reaffirm people’s sense of place and attachment to the place – villages of origin (Barkan *et al.* 1991).

Transnational/Trans-virtual Associational Networks

In the wake of increased transnational migration, home-village associations have become important nodal points within the wider diaspora network (Vertovec 2004), with PIFAM, PNF and PDO as frontier people rallying the migrant and diasporan population towards the home village as a result of the shared cultural identity that is realised through communication and collective action (Brinkerhoff 2009: 39). Communication from home is often from local elites of the PDO and/or other locally based members and is channelled via the PNF. As the mother association, the PDO is expected to act as a watchdog over the Pinyin clan and inform the diaspora community through the PNF. As opined by Greig (2002, cited in Brinkerhoff 2009: 44) this connection creates virtual communities that overlap with physical communities.





As frontier people linked to the home-village by ICTs suggests an awareness of events that happen simultaneously in different places. By the same token, such connectivity and awareness mean members get to be actively and emotionally engaged in events (Prelipeanu 2008). It could perhaps be inferred from this that, contrary to Putnam (2000), community is not so much in decline with the coming of ICTs, but rather that ICTs have created new alternative spaces for people to sustain meaningful real communities in the virtual world at a distance through membership of associations and organisations such as the ones discussed here. These public-sphere activities and connectedness give migrants, miles away from home, the chance to engage in critical discussion and self-expression through which participants (re)define their sense of identity, community and agency, and they can also create their own





spaces. The redefinition of identity also charts multiple-identity affiliations that could implicitly or explicitly qualitatively change the nature of migrants' experiences (Cerulo 1997).

Consequently, PNF has thus created online public spaces that allow for on-going dialogue largely unbounded by territory but rather by a common identity and shared values and ideas of a common place, i.e. home village. Due to the quest to belong and to reify their attachment to the home village, migrants have aptly harnessed ICTs to insert themselves in the socio-economic, cultural and development processes in the home village. These cyberspace discussions create 'new social movements and collective initiatives that are self-reflexive and are sharply focused on the expressive actions of collective members (Melucci 1989: 60). Explicating further, (Ibid) notes that such collective initiatives produce 'collective agency' because collectives consciously coordinate action. As shown below, the coordination and assistance needed for the high school back home is done through the collective of PDO and channelled through PNF to attract funds. It is only through such Internet-mediated spaces and improved monetary transaction services that these mobile communities can make meaningful contributions to village development.

Unlike the face-to-face meetings and place-based PIFAM, actions are bounded by physical communities and structures that enforce discipline. The same cannot be said of online public space where the community is virtual. Contributions are made to PNF from all over the world by Pinyin indigenes who are connected to the Internet.

Often, the exchanges on the forums are usually communal and cultural. PNF experiences a high participation of members all over the globe. However, admission of new members to the forum is recommended and vouched for by existing members. PNF is opened only to indigenes, hence my attempts at subscribing to it proved futile. In PNF there are dedicated people in the home country and the various nodal points that share updates about happenings at home and in their respective cities as well as about development projects that need to be carried out. This is done to realign the development agenda of the diaspora to that of the home village that, at times, are not well versed in the realities on the ground or may want to pursue a different development agenda. By and large, the activities of the forum still remain linked to home village development and the fostering of a collective sense of community and ownership, as reiterated by this message posted on PNF: 'Citizen involvement/participation is a desired and necessary part for that community's development process. It is therefore a process that can meaningfully tie programmes and institutions to people and people to others.'³

News in the forum, however, is diverse, from concerns about chieftaincy, land disputes, religion, cultural and heritage education, political discussions, death announcements, and, of

³ Sent to PNF, 22 January 2012.





course, developmental projects. It is important to note the critical role of the Internet to mediate these discussions, coordinated by a moderator.

The subsequent paragraphs that follow, drawing on McLaughlin *et al.* (1997), I will dwell on the interpersonal messages that bring out and recognises personal identity and communal exchanges that focus on village and the community. Through these categories of postings I examine the level of virtual communication, transnational connectedness and development strategising in order to adequately understand how collective identities direct participants to define the parameters and appropriate arenas of collective action. These mobile groupings are networking amongst themselves irrespective of distance and are constantly fed news from home on a daily basis.

One of such mail posted in 2010 on PNF by a trans-local migrant and member of the PDO about events unfolding in the Pinyin clan entitled “A time bomb awaits us, unless people react now” generated an array of responses from members all over the globe. Below is the initial mail:

Pinyin - Mechop,⁴

Many have asked on this forum to know the names of the 14 new MBEIs (chief)⁵ in Pinyin village. The list has remained a myth and a decomposing egg locked up in a secluded cupboard

in fear of the stench it will produce if exposed. Mankind is still to be shown the winner of a prize who is afraid and ashamed to expose his trophy.

These are crowns sold to the highest bidder in my dear motherland and stealthily received through the back door. Let me caution you here. Nowadays when you receive an invitation for a ceremony dubbed 'cry-die or memorial service' in Pinyin, be wary that your bosom cheap friend or chop chair maybe using your presence and personality to swell up the crowd at his initiation to chieftaincy.⁶

This mail generated a flurry of responses and the debate within the PNF went for over four months. The following mails below are some of postings in response to the above mail.

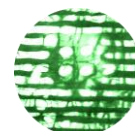
A) Pinyin Mechop

Tradition can be modernized but its norms, values, and beliefs must always be constant. Mischievousness continues to linger around the throne of the Pinyin Clan and we are gradually seeing the once venerated empire in the Ngemba becoming (sic) a melting pot. These inconsequential exploit the illiteracy that surrounds the crown of thorns to achieve

⁴ A way of addressing Pinyin people, loosely translated as Pinyin people

⁵ Word in italic included by the author.

⁶ Sent to PNF, 22 July 2010 (from Cameroon).





unpalatable goals. These power mongers who aim at nothing but to destroy, radiate around 'long throats' and 'bottlenecks' to pick crowns from the gutter... I warn that Pinyin in the days of Muluh Payne, Khemechi's, Peizui, Asopntshi and Nfor Teneng fought for the political unification of this village. These were rulers should they roar, neighbouring villages will run without picking a pin. Some were guillotine (sic) for the sake of the village. This is because they held the traditional norms and values that govern Pinyin at heart, Values which they inherited from the forefathers.

He who has been assigned a task as tradition demands will be held accountable should he go against the tenets of the land... But then one questions the role of the PDO in this crucial issue given that we are yet to get a word from them. To diffuse this time bomb I therefore propose that:

1- Governance at the helm of the crown should be reshuffled. A council of elite indepted (sic) with a comprehensive view of Pinyin tradition be formed to monitor any decision making process in the clan. In this case, those who sit around to practice and signed for the fon will no longer do so.

2- I proposed that we should re-instate the Pinyin Area Traditional Council of the 1970's. It included the fon's half brothers and shold (sic) that be done, the big society we want to live in today will exists based on harmonized traditional norms and values.

3-Decentralisation of powers to nowadays power mongers must work with authority. If the chief of Muwah, Aso'oh, KongNtoh Menka does not command the authority and respect of the people, then that should not exist. I conclude by saying that the people grow to make the society big but sociological imagination is always a precursor to these greater achievements.⁷

B) Dear Pa X dear All

Thanks for the document.

However, what I find interesting is that we seem to ignore the fact that the Fon's signature is on the document, prompting a number of questions:

1. By questioning the decision to grant the status of chiefs and subchiefs, are we not directly questioning the Fon's authority?
2. If so, is it proper, acceptable and common for us as subjects to do so?
3. Does the Fon of Pinyin take such decisions unanimously or with a governing council?

⁷ Sent to PNF, 21 July 2010.





4. If in consultation with a council, who are members of the governing council and did they participate in deciding on the need for additional chiefs, the selection criteria and on the decision to sign and submit this document to the administration to formalise the process?⁸

C) Dear forumers

This is not the first time we are debating on this forum. For what I know all debates are directed to the PDO to respond. For all I know all the debates always end up in voicemail.

First was the issue of “gun firing” in our clan, “Armed Robbery” on our Pinyin Bali road and among others the “Arson at muwah Palace”. The PDO did not issue a statement on any of this except I did not get the mail. My suggestion is that we should give the PDO 2weeks to issue a statement on their stand (sic) on:

- 1) The creation of these 19 chiefs!
- 2) Were they part of this creation?
- 3) If yes, why did they think it was necessary, and of what importance are these

Chiefs to the Pinyin people?

If we fail to get the statement we can pass a vote of no confidence on the PDO leadership and form a committee that can get to the roots of this mess. This Committee will consist of people who have put their lives on the line for this Clan before, who are always there for the development of this clan, who have done similar things like this for the clan, who say things as there are supposed to be. Otherwise this chieftency (sic) issue will still go to voicemail and will do us no good. We should act now or someone will put a finger into another’s eye which must be avoided.⁹

The above mails are suggestive of how Pinyin people around the world operate in cyberspace while staying connected with the tangible community resulting in a vibrant and living communities and organizations (Brinkerhoff, 2004). Facilitated by the Internet the Pinyin community has created a cyberspace for online discussion, debates and the mobilisation of opinions whose impact resonates in the home village. Through this shared communal exchanges, members are able to question the re-invention and redefinition of tradition and the creation of more chieftaincy in the village. The Internet gives members the agency to voice opinions, to be counted and visible compared to the host societies where they have become less visible, and pushed to the margins. Being frontier people have given them the agency of taking control over the internet to effect the sort of change they want to see at home.

⁸ Sent to PNF, 22 July 2010 (from Cape Town).

⁹ Sent to PNF 23 July 2010





Associations as Agents of Development

Development is an integral feature that underlies the viability and credibility of these associations in the place they consider home (Trager 1998; Mercer *et al.* 2008, 2009; Mercer & Page 2010; Riccio 2011). Accordingly, home associations have the power to re-orientate belonging-based policies by mobilising collective action and resources to mitigate the struggle for power, gender imbalance and inequalities through new by-laws. This presupposes that by linking home and away these frontier people are able to draw opportunities both ways to enhance themselves and also to contribute to developments at home. Although the projects are not on a massive scale compared to those carried by the government, they are quite significant given the impact they have on the lives of the beneficiaries. Development projects are coordinated by the PDO via PNF, and participants respond very generously when they read a mail urgently requesting for assistance from the translocal migrant/elite back home. The following email below called for assistance towards the replacement of damaged infrastructure of Government High School Kwang. It generated massive response from Pinyins the world over who belong to PNF.

The Government High School Kwang has grown into a large community with its incessant compelling problems. As at now, one easily identifies three main areas: an acute shortage of teachers, the damage of 34 computers and the pathetic situation of poor and needy students.

1. Acute Shortage of Teachers

At least four senior temporary teachers are urgently needed in the following subjects for the examination classes: Geology, Mathematics, Physics and History. ...

2. Damaged computers

On Wednesday 14 December 2011, a total of 34 computers were damaged as a result of an electric surge. ... You may be willing to offer one all alone or join with someone. You may like to contact Mr X based in Bamenda, a dealer on all kinds of computers. Certainly the best offer is an instrument to prevent future surges.

3. Poor and Needy Students

You bless yourself when you bless others. Everyone has something to offer. Never say you cannot help someone in need because you are not rich enough. ... The act of giving is cultivated. Cultivate it. Be a blessing to others and see them as opportunities and not adversaries. ...¹⁰

The following emails are in response to the above call for donations:

¹⁰ Sent to PNF, 1 January 2012 (from Buea).





1). I hereby undertake to pay the salary of one of the four teachers needed for the next five months, ie from February to June this year (2012). Pa, see to it that the teacher is hired to start from the 1st of February. I will cause the sum of 40,000frs to be deposited into the PS 20 account every month for the teacher's salary. Just let me know when is the best time (sic) for the money to be in the account.¹¹

2). I am particularly touched by the Computer crisis as I visited the site of that damage two days after. I hereby promise 05 PIV with LCD monitors on behalf of my enterprise XXXX XXXXXX.¹²

3). I would be donating 10 of these computers (CPUs only) to help in this crisis. My assumption here is that others can join me in getting them ready for use, by providing the other accessories (mouse, keyboards, speakers and monitors) needed.¹³

4). I will send a widows might (sic) of 25000frs to add to the fund for part time staff.¹⁴

Members respond generously to emails that appeal for development funds as seen above. In the same vein, mobiles expect that while they readily make the funds available, translocals who cannot generate similar funds too should supply man-power and technical know-how. Like the 'town crier' the successful realisation of the project is underpinned by the role of internet-mediated communication to rally the Pinyin people and her diaspora to answer the call of development.

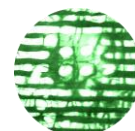
Another case in point is the electrification project in Pinyin by the Pinyin people, led by local/international migrants and coordinated by the Pinyin Development Association (PDO). Quite often, personal emails are sent or phone calls made to individuals whose expertise is indispensable and to those considered affluent to give more than the usual donation by everyone. Similarly, PDO was also involved in the construction and equipping of the first high school and are still coordinating development project such as a the above mail informing Pinyins about the destruction of computers. Development projects are, however, not negligible and go a long way towards filling a void and bringing the migrant community alive in the village given the huge amounts of money they are expected to contribute. As regards the setting of the development agenda, unlike Trager (1998) who posits that the agenda for community projects is set by the elite who are not resident in the community, I maintain that development projects are set and supervised by national elites or 'translocal elites' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993) that are not resident in the village. They make regular visits to the village, while local and international migrants play a key role regarding financial contributions. Nevertheless, a very critical and non-intuitive aspect in the strengthening of home-village

¹¹ Sent to PNF, 17 January 2012 (from Cape Town).

¹² Sent to PNF, 19 January 2012 (from Bamenda).

¹³ Sent to PNF, 22 January 2012 (from the US).

¹⁴ Sent to PNF, 10 February 2012 (from Ngoundere).





associations is the role played by their relationship with home-based associations, as will be seen below.

Besides information coming directly from the trans-local elites, I argue that distance is also bridged by committed individuals who have chosen to be the link between home and international associations and can find compromises to avoid anything that could disrupt information flows and connectivity. For example, the following email sent by a PDO member about pressing infrastructural needs and requesting for more funds.

Dear forumers,

The buchi community wishes to thank all friends and well-wishers who turned out in their numbers to give them a push yesterday during the launching of GSS buchi project... BUDECA¹⁵ yde (*Yaoundé*) intends to construct and equip two classrooms worth 5,000 000. During the launching yesterday, 800,000 FRS cash was realized... 1.5million was pledged. But like oliver twist (sic), we continue to ask for more.¹⁶

Through this mail, the Pinyin community at large have been informed about the launch of the Government Secondary School project and what still needs to be achieved. Further the exchanges above show how associations are institutions in their own right and are capable of planning their own courses of action to support development calls from home village. The danger, albeit, of such a developmental plan is that it obfuscates the government's participation in development in the area and lends little or no credibility to the government. However, such infrastructural projects aim to celebrate migrants and the migration-development nexus as well as providing basic social amenities, enhancing human capital, the corollary to which would be more people contributing towards village development in the future. By the same token, it celebrates advances in ICTs as these frontier people have been able to harness it to the greater good of the village and themselves.

PIFAM's development activities like other affiliated associations are initiated by PDO and a communiqué is sent out via the PNF. Similarly, in an effort to synchronise development, PIFAM often liaise with PDO to find out what urgent project needs to be carried out or someone travelling home is mandated to meet the translocal elites and study a project's feasibility or suggest alternative ones. While PIFAM partakes in home-village development, she is also concerned with harnessing development of her members in the host country as it enables members to make meaningful contribution at home. One of such self-development is the Rotatory Savings and Credit Association (ROSCA). Here, like other financial transactions, the role of ICTs in facilitating is indispensable and PIFAM has adopted the new technology to facilitate the process. All contributions are done via bank transfers into the beneficiary's account. Following each deposit, the beneficiary receives an SMS from the bank

¹⁵ Buchi (a quarter within Pinyin) Development and Cultural Association.

¹⁶ Posted on the forum, 21/11/2011.





to notify him/her of the transaction and the amount deposited into his/her account. Two SMSs from the beneficiary of the *njangi* shed light on this point: ‘FNB R4000 paid to smart Account xxxxxx @ on line Banking. Ref. Ben + Doris’ and ‘FNB R2000 paid to smart Account xxxxxx @ Gugulethu ATM. Ref. Andre 1 and 2’.¹⁷ Except in cases where the beneficiary wants the money in cash, all transactions are done via the bank. Most of the members use their mobile phones for transactions or the nearest ATM at their place of business. Although most have bank accounts in Cape Town, these are usually used to transfer money to Cameroon to be sure they are able to access it in the event of repatriation or it can be handed over to the family in the event of death. In this connection, most PIFAM members have credit-union accounts with the (Pinyin) Metayen Credit Union (MITACUL) back home hence money from their *njangi*, is withdrawn from their bank account and placed in MITACUL by the trustee who has their Visa card. For instance, when Joyce received R25, 000 from the *njangi*, the money was withdrawn by her sister in Cameroon and put into her MITACUL credit-union account. The rapid Internet banking facilities have made it possible for migrants to transfer money to their credit-union accounts with relative ease and they can also monitor transactions from the SMS alerts sent by the bank each time money is withdrawn back home or in Cape Town (Nyamnjoh, 2014).

In order to avoid paying exorbitant fees for money transfers, these mobile people have learnt to circumnavigate it by sending an extra visa card to a trusted relation or friend who withdraws all the money from his/her SA account into the Credit Union. Having a card at home facilitates contribution towards village development.

Inasmuch as one of the main goals of home village/virtual associations is to foster development projects at home, they equally cater for the members and take advantage of opportunities that are available. In this connection, members do not hesitate to post mails that inform and announce job offers, scholarships or information that may be beneficiary to members. Such information is meant to be informative and need no respond. For instance, a message was posted with the subject [“Social Media Review- Watch what you put out there!”](#)¹⁸, [to warn members of the use of social media. Another post announcing the change in phone numbers:](#) “Cameroon Phone numbers to go to 9 digits soon”.¹⁹ And that of PNF announcing the first superintendent of police: “{PNF} Here comes the first Pinyin Superintendent of Police”.²⁰ It is thanks to virtual spaces and connectivity that members benefit from information sharing and referrals.

A shared sense of identity, community and collective action towards the home village have mobilised mobiles and diasporans towards stronger bonds that make collective action possible, it also generates the shared identity required for collective action. Through this

¹⁷ SMS forwarded to this researcher, 19/05/2011.

¹⁸ Sent to PNF, 10 January 2012.

¹⁹ Sent to PNF, 01 February 2014.

²⁰ Sent to PNF, 22 November 2013.





collective action, members are given a platform to share their individual specific skills and capacities.

Despite these collective action and show of strength in numbers, posts on the forum at times result in misunderstanding among members that degenerate to verbal altercations. This suggests that inasmuch as Internet-mediated forums often show tendencies of virtual intimacies and collective action, tensions do occur that threatens the unity of the group.

Discussion and conclusion

ICTs and Internet-mediated forums play a major role in the socio-cultural fabric of mobiles and diasporas to coordinate their activities, linking them virtually to other migrant groups and to the home village. Through these forums the latter seek to (re) establish a social cohesion amongst members as well as acting as a bridge between the host community and the home village community. Owing to the availability of communication technologies and their attachment to the home village, mobiles/associations have distinguished themselves as frontier people who harness opportunities of socio-economic, cultural development and other developmental processes towards the home village because of their shared cultural identity. Pursuing this common agenda is underpinned by the wide availability and accessibility of the different forms of ICTs that have been appropriated to meet specific needs. By the same token, marginalising trends of exclusion in the host country and geographic and socio-economic marginalisation in the home country as a result of underdevelopment has reified this notion of belonging amongst local migrants and dispora community to come together for a common purpose. Through their collective efforts, immobile socialisation, interaction and shared needs and interests have pushed the boundaries of development and set new standards surpassing that of home government. The PNF have become advocates for the return to 'tradition' especially in matters that have been eroded by modernity and wealth. Together, these associations have continued a strong virtual/corporeal bond that attends to various social and cultural developments. Internet-mediated action provides a space for individual postings to be mutually reinforced with those of the communities around similar issues for endorsements. (Stop)

While the social and cultural character of physical association mimics that of the main associations at home and the activities that form part of their social life, such as development projects, cultural activities and *njangis*. Such moments of cultural showcasing enable migrants to create a home-away-from-home, which reinvigorates their Pinyin identity as well as their bond with the home village. In this regard, associations should be understood within the framework of agency in the production of structures because 'structure is both the medium and outcome of action' (Karp 1986: 135). Such structures define belonging, identity and exclusion and are a way in which actions can be enabled. As noted by Mohan & Hickey (2004 in Evans 2010: 418), the projection of ethnic identity is underscored by the fact that the formation of the state in Africa was primarily based on the collation of ethnic identities where





they are linked to a common place, i.e. ‘home’, through a shared meaning, culture and common goal. It could also be explained by the fact that as frontier people, they are more driven by the need to develop their village (Pinyin) to prepare a place for their eventual homecoming, as well as their marginality in the host society. As such, migrants and trans-locals, through these technological connections, migrants have become a life-line in the lives of those back at home. As Parham (2005: 349) usefully notes, the creation of such mediated public spheres enables participants to ‘move from shared imagination to collective action’, thanks to the ‘Internet-mediated network public’, hence they are mutually reinforcing. Intertwining the lives of frontier people, ICTs as I have shown, are used to inform of the urgent needs at home, and it helps in cultivating a sense of efficacy through information dissemination about the progress and success in achieving collective objectives like the school, electrification and water projects (PNF).

This interconnectedness between ICTs and development is evidenced in self-development in the host country as well through the *njangis* that members benefit to assist them and their families at home as well as the loans that are disbursed directly into the lender’s account via cell phone banking. The cell phone has dramatically altered the way ‘mobiles’ do business and often transactions are while ‘sitting down’. In other words, “they are waiting for their phones to ring”.

Such urban-rural connections and social bonding capital have challenged the modernisation theory that forecasts a disconnection between urban migrants/diaspora and ruralites. Migrants cope with home nostalgia by maintaining multiple-stranded virtual relationships with various associations and home associations. In the same light, these associations could be seen as strong societies that have assumed the role of a weak state.

Whilst migrants maintain a hybrid identity, a shared identity and belonging is privileged, and they express these identities through activities on behalf of the home village or in support of the quality of life in the home village (human capital development through construction of schools and scholarships). The urgency to express identity may be motivated by the different forms of marginalisation (social, economic and political), nostalgic feelings and the ‘sense that the cultural values may be lost without proactive expression’ (Brinkerhoff 2009: 174). Mobiles tend to operate within multiple and virtual spatiality, while the ‘homeland’ remains Pinyin, home is fluid as development takes place in home and host countries. In this respect, they have intensified their links with home by participating in development project as well as contributing constructive ideas in the forum towards enhancing socio-cultural and traditional values in the home village. In a similar way, physical associations (PIFAM) replicate and redefine their cultural activities in their host countries. The success of development projects supported by migrant associations has awakened positive emotions towards continued development participation. Such multiple-stranded relationships and connections have been made possible by the omnipresence of communication technology, which has given rise to the





convergence of tangible and virtual communities with a common focus of home and self-development.

While belonging is stressed and associations' Internet-mediated forums appear to be an umbrella that unites members, social cohesion is not a given as there are virtual altercations that threaten the unity and moral conviviality that bind members, with ramifications of identity contestations. By extension, these forums at times undermine traditional notions of respect in the society and users become inattentive in the manner at which elders are addressed. The advent of ICTs has increased migrants' virtual mobility and transnational/trans-virtual social ties with migrant associations that share a common 'place', meaning and identity. Through their respective forums, they have harnessed the Internet and, more recently, the new social media that have made nonsense of borders and rendered them porous, thus bringing the home village closer to migrants. Owing to this, mobile communities are able to contribute to the development of the home village through their individual skills and collective capacities.

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