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Jérémy Pasini

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"A HUMAN BEING WITHOUT A CELL PHONE IS AKIN TO BEING LIFELESS" ^(A)

Mobile phones, social capital and solidarities in the central Moungo region (Cameroon)¹

Jérémy PASINI²

(Ph.D. Student in geography, University of Toulouse, France)

Summary. One of the most significant trends in Cameroon over the past two decades has been the rapid diffusion of the cellular telephony. The number of mobile phones' has risen from a few thousands in the early 2000s to more than seventeen million in 2014. How should we explain this unprecedented diffusion of cell phones? Why is it so crucial to be able to make phone calls and send short text messages, especially in countrysides and medium towns? This work starts from the hypothesis that Moungo's inhabitants can no longer build a resilient livelihood only from village resources (like the monetary salary arisen from the plantation) and are therefore always on the look-out for external unexplored occasions. Wireless phones are here seen as tools that enables individuals to make the most of diversified and spatially scattered social networks, thereby opening new areas of solidarity (that is conceived not only in the common sense of being helped in case of accident, but also in the meaning of being informed about accumulation opportunities) between rural and urban spaces. The analysis of individuals' telephone use leaves no doubt that wireless telecommunications have become an essential requisite and an object of success. For instance, the ethnographic material gleaned over the past three years sheds light on the positive role of handheld devices in money and social remittances (ideas, values, beliefs, new ways of designing and organizing activities, etc.) within families that function more and more like "domestic diasporas". The paper concludes that each person articulates a network of people (of places) that is materialized by mobilities and mobiles' uses. This reticular structure spans the rural-urban divide to the extent that it indifferently includes components from both spaces. It is, furthermore, a transient form of organization that is modified according to (unexpected) economic possibilities and personal desires. Such a model cannot be properly described using a somewhat rigid territorial framework.

Zusammenfassung. Die Zahl der Mobiltelefone ist in Kamerun in den letzten sechzehn Jahren geradezu explosionsartig angestiegen. Im Jahr 2000 belief sich die Zahl der Funktelefone auf nur 103 000, 2007 waren es schon 4,5 Millionen Handys und im Jahr 2014 lag die Zahl bereits bei 17 Millionen. Wie lässt sich dieses rasante Wachstum erklären? Was bedeutet die Verbreitung von Mobiltelefonen hinsichtlich der Bildung persönlicher „Alltagsräume“ und nachbarschaftlicher Beziehungen? Jenseits des Preissturzes im Mobilfunkbereich und der zunehmenden Bedeutung individueller Kommunikation, drückt die starke Verbreitung von Funktelefonen in Kamerun auch ein wachsendes Bedürfnis der Menschen aus, über weite Entfernungen hinweg zu interagieren. Seit der schweren Kaffeekrise in den 1980er und 1990er Jahren, haben die Bewohner der Region Moungo ihre wichtigste Einkommens- und Prestigequelle verloren. Infolgedessen sind sie immer mehr dazu gezwungen, die lebenswichtigen Ressourcen wie Geld, Solidarität oder politische Einfluss, außerhalb ihres ländlichen Wohnraums zu suchen. Der Autor geht davon aus, dass die Nutzung von „modernen“ Telekommunikationsmitteln, es besonders jüngeren Generationen und Frauen, erlaubt, von unerwarteten Gelegenheiten wie offene Arbeitsplätze oder zeitliche begrenzte Akkumulationschancen, zu profitieren, existierende Netzwerke zu pflegen und „neue“ Kontakte zu knüpfen. Dieses Postulat lädt uns ein, etwas Abstand von eher rigiden Forschungskategorien (Stadt, Land, Territorium, usw.) zu nehmen, um die zunehmende Flexibilität, Multilokalität und Ungewissheit individueller Strategien der ländlichen Bevölkerung Kameruns besser in Betracht zu ziehen.

^(A) All the interviews mobilized in the present article are marked with a letter. The title is actually a quotation made by a young lady (27 years old), who lives in Loum and is an agriculturist. She was interviewed in February 2016.

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² The author is indebted to Tom Nashon Nyangau for numerous valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks a lot to Franziska Ollendorf for having reviewed the first draft of the summary in German.

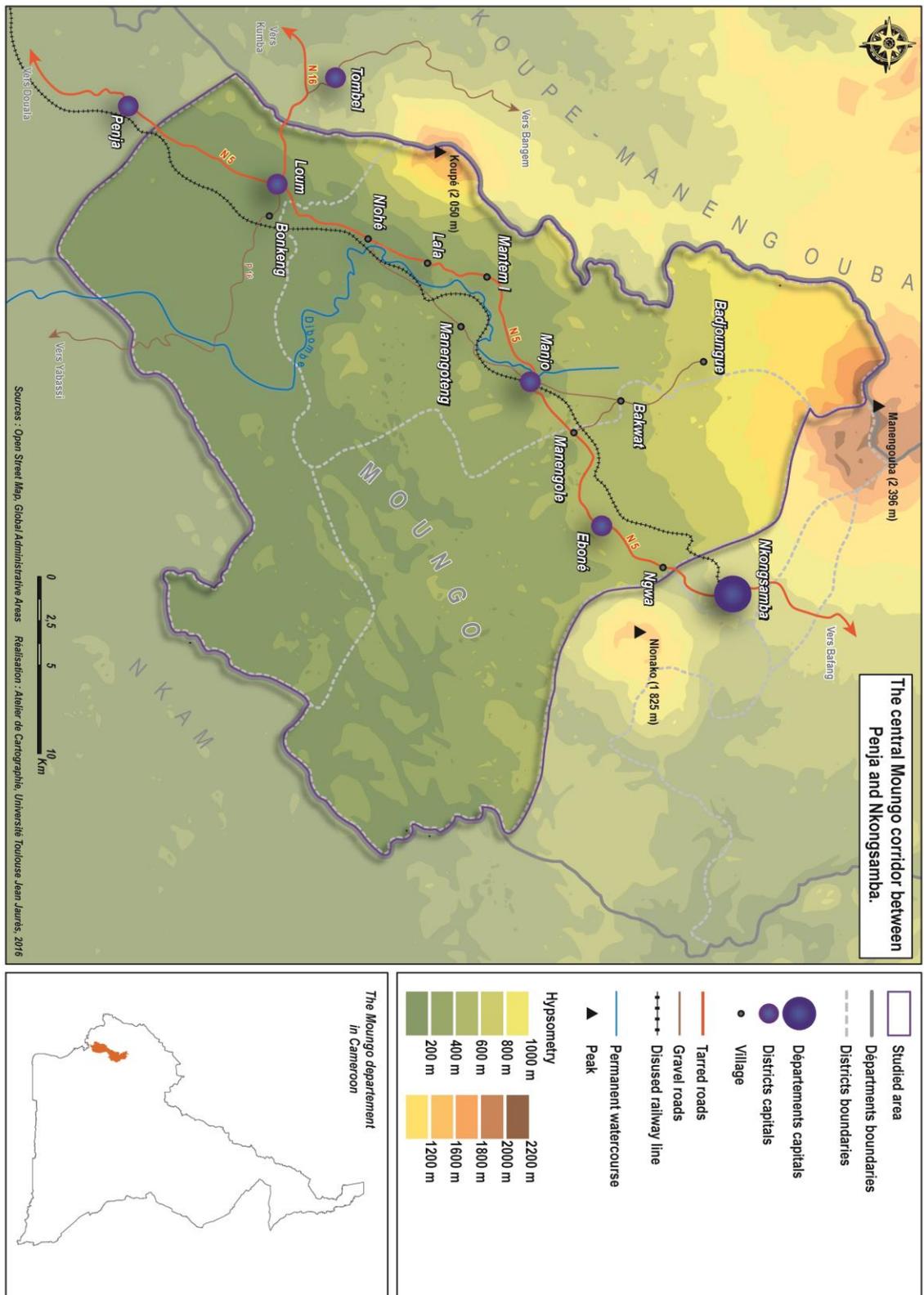
1. Introduction

One of the most significant trends in Cameroon over the past two decades has been the rapid diffusion of the cellular telephony. The number of mobile phones has risen from a few thousands in the early 2000s to more than seventeen million in 2014, whereas the national population has reached almost 23 million of persons in the same time³. This technologic innovation is not only employed by the wealthy, the well-educated and the urban, but also by the poor⁴, whose greatest proportion is still living in rural areas. In some secluded villages, such as Badjoungue (refer to map no. 1 (p.3)), the usage of GSM phones demands huge efforts to counterbalance the absence or the deficiency of the electric and cellular networks. More generally, in the Mounjo valley as well as in its mountainous outskirts, the cost of communication remains a big issue despite the substantial sacrifices conceded by operators to adapt their price ranges accordingly (Chéneau-Loquay, 2010: 4). The outlays caused by the recourse to cell phones are all the more problematic because most of Mounjo's inhabitants suffer from limited budget: the commercialization of agro-products or the profits from small informal enterprises are hardly sufficient to satisfy their needs. These constraints, however, do not prevent them from using cell phones (mainly second-hand devices bought or offered by family members).

If the diffusion of mobile phones throughout Cameroon has generated a plentiful literature and given birth to a lot of hopes regarding poverty alleviation within this territory (Chéneau-Loquay, 2010: 9 & 27; Fodouop & Toguem (Dir.), in: Fodouop & Bidi, 2010: 231-241; Bonjawo, 2011: 87-95), the underlying reasons that justify such an explosion have been hardly addressed so far. Thus, this paper is dealing with a very simple question: Why is it so crucial to be able to make phone calls and send short text messages, especially in countrysides and medium towns? In inter-tropical Africa, probably more than in other World' regions, the access to new economic opportunities and the support in case of misfortune are dependent on the importance and diversity of a person's "social capital". This is, perhaps, best captured by the French geographer A. Chéneau-Loquay when she asserts that "the poor are those who are alone" (Chéneau-Loquay, in: Bouquet, 2010: 219). Nevertheless, whether we can expect to get help from the extended family or from some friends largely depends on the quality and the frequency of the communication with kith and kin: the sending of letters, the weekly visits and the interactions through the phone contribute to keep the interpersonal relations alive. Insofar as the weaving, the upkeep and the animation of such "social capital" demand a lot of resources (money, time, etc.), it is wholly pertinent to consider it as an "investment": We will elaborate on this aspect later in the paper. At this point, the main hypothesis of the study is as follows: "the spread of cell phones enables individuals, especially the young ones, to make the most of diversified and spatially scattered social networks, thereby opening new areas of solidarity (that is conceived not only in the common sense of being helped in case of accident, but also in the meaning of being informed about accumulation opportunities) between rural and urban spaces". This assumption implies that the individuals who have difficulties to interact with places outside their living area would be somehow less resilient to mishaps. The paper is divided into six sections: after a brief presentation on the socio-economic context in the investigated zone (part 2), the concept of "social capital" will be revisited having regard to the research question (part 3) and the methodology will be outlined (part 4). The major findings of the inquiry are presented and discussed in the penultimate section (part 5), whereas the sixth section concludes the article.

³ These figures have been borrowed from the data portal of the Sherbrooke's university. They can be checked here: <http://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMTendanceStatPays?codeTheme=11&codeStat=IT.CEL.SETS&codePays=CMR&codeTheme2=1&codeStat2=SP.POP.TOTL&codePays2=CMR&langue=fr> (Accessed: 05/03/2016).

⁴ The monetary poverty threshold has been set at 931 CFA Francs for one adult, by the Fourth Cameroon Household Survey. This information comes from the national bureau of statistics: <http://www.statistics-cameroon.org/news.php?id=311> (Accessed: 05/03/2016). It is useful to specify that 1 € is worth 655.957 CFA Francs.



Map 1. Outline of the research field: the central Mungo between Penja and Nkongsamba.

2. From the golden age of Robusta coffee to socio-economic hardship

Although it was one of the most dynamic and prosperous territory of Cameroon in the post-colonial time, the central Moungo corridor is facing, in the last decades, a set of exogenous and endogenous transformations that impact sorely the living conditions of its residents. The region has, indeed, never completely recovered from the Robusta coffee crisis⁵, in the 1980s and the 1990s, and the "market gardening" model (Chaléard, 1996: 16) is no panacea. To the extent that they are wary of cooperatives and are profoundly tied to their self-reliance, the majority of the Moungo's planters cope alone with exorbitant production costs: pesticides, fertilizers and improved seeds have become unaffordable in the current liberalized context, just like the access to farming land, whose worth has peaked owing to an exacerbated competition between small-scale agriculturists, international agro-industries, people seeking a site to build their house and NGOs involved in biodiversity protection. On the other side, the disbursements made by producers are only slightly offset by the profits from agro-commodities trade. The *Bayam-Sellam*⁶ use trickeries to buy foodstuff at the lowest rate (as an illustration, they contest the quality of the targeted merchandize), before re-selling it with a surplus value. A notable exception to this general overview would be, however, the case of the Penja white pepper: one kilogram of these precious, cream-coloured berries is commercialized from 14 000 CFA Francs upwards (this should be looked at in the context of the national minimum wage earned being 36 000 CFA Francs per month). It is important to point out that this traditional spice has been crowned by a protected geographical indication in 2013⁷ and that its commodity chain is much more structured than others, with a syndicate that truly takes into account the requirements of its members (such as the recent completion of an irrigation plant).

The individuals engaged in non-agricultural activities are not necessarily better-off than the peasants, even in relatively new sectors, such as the motorcycle taxis or the management of phone booths. Irrespective of the multiple dangers they incur (helmets are rarely worn, motorbikes are not always well maintained, roads are strewn with potholes, etc.), the *benskinners* do not pocket a lot of cash. For instance, a journey within the boundaries of Loum is invoiced 100 CFA Francs, while a round-trip between Loum and Nlohé (see map no. 1) yields barely 1000 CFA Francs. Furthermore, a great part of these motorcyclists are not the owners of their working tools; this means that a percentage of the receipt goes to the employer. The same is true for the *call-boxers*, who struggle with fierce rivalries: the surroundings of any bus station are ordinarily overloaded by multi-coloured umbrellas, below which phone credits as well as drinks, candies, cigarettes, tissues and other small items are retailed. Although it cannot be denied that some businesses may be more lucrative than the ones just mentioned (for instance, certain grocery stores may have a 50 000 CFA Francs turnover in best days⁸), the overall picture remains in many regards negative. In spite of the resourcefulness displayed by the Moungo's residents, especially school graduates, who have trouble integrating the formal labour market, the earnings hardly sustain them; on the other hand, it is absolutely insufficient to honour financial commitments (such as the annual contribution to *development committees*) and start accumulating capital.

⁵ The average global prices for Robusta coffee decreased from 1094 CFA Francs in 1986 to 651 CFA Francs in 1987 (Fongang Fouepe, 2009: 90). One of the main causes advanced to explain the slump of *Coffea canephora* in the late 1980's is the structural disequilibrium between supply and demand: indeed, while the consumption of Robusta coffee was shrinking in the targeted western markets, Asian states like Indonesia and Vietnam considerably stepped up their production between 1970 and 1990 (Freud & Freud, 1994: 597-598).

⁶ All local expressions are debunked in the table B at the end of the present paper.

⁷ This has been learnt in the French newspaper *Le monde*, which has published an article about white pepper in March 2016. It can be read here: http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/03/08/cameroun-le-poivre-de-penja-produit-du-terroir-aux-aromes-magiques_4878710_3212.html (Accessed: 11/03/2016).

⁸ This information has been obtained in the course of an informal conversation with a shopkeeper from Mbouda, but living in Loum for many years.



That is the reason why the youth, farmers, employees and petty businessmen are always on the look-out for external solidarities and unexplored occasions.

Picture 1. A call-box at the Tombel crossroad in Loum. This activity is mainly performed by women in Cameroon. Some phone booths, like the one presented on the left, are merely composed of an umbrella and a basic timber stand, but others have the appearance of kiosks and are carefully decorated. This photography has been taken in 2016.

3. “Social capital as an investment in social relations” (Lin, 1999: 30-31)

The idea of "social capital" was coined in 1916 by the American educator L. J. Hanifan to justify the necessity of renewed community involvement to sustain democracy and development. In the initial period, this abstraction was merely referring to "goodwill, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit" (Hanifan, 1916: 130). The significance of this key-word of social sciences has, however, significantly changed over the past century and led to intense discussions among scholars (Putnam & Goss (Ed.), 2002: 6-19). An

interesting synthesis has been provided by N. Lin at the dawn of the third millennium: he defines it as an "investment in social relations with expected returns". These "expected returns" allude in the first place to money (Lin, 1999: 30-31), but they may also encompass non-financial aspects (such as the acquisition of any favour)⁹. This conceptualization perfectly describes the reality of Cameroon, where citizens are often embedded in logic of gifts/counter-gifts: the wholesalers, for example, grant credits and offer presents to their providers with the idea of assuring their stocks; similarly, political elites subsidize the construction of heavy and visible infrastructures (such as roads, power lines...) with the aim of cajoling their potential electorate (Kengne-Fodouop, 2003: 52). We suppose that the utilization of cellular phones obey more or less the same rules. At the first sight, indeed, GSM phones give people the means to exchange news continually, without having to venture out to travel on perilous roads or tracks. Not a baptism, graduation or bereavement ceremony passes unnoticed, since the information about such events circulates now quasi-instantly: so, the “emotional distance” between members of the same family or clan is reduced to nothing by wireless telecommunications, whereas other forms of distances (measured in terms of kilometres, journey time and journey cost) are still existing (see picture below). In other words, mobile phones bring a bit of proximity, where there is a separation. This is absolutely not insignificant, since the probability to be assisted in case of disease or in a job search is close to zero if one has neglected the relatives and acquaintances for long: more precisely, the concrete requests, that often emerge in the midst of apparently neutral salutations, have no chance to succeed if the contact and the chain of reciprocity have been durably broken.

⁹ The way Nan Lin conceptualizes the notion of “social capital” is actually inspired by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Indeed, the latter has shown that interpersonal ties never exist *ex nihilo*, but require an “establishment and maintenance work that is necessary to produce and reproduce durable liaisons, which, in turn, bring material and symbolic profits” (Bourdieu, 1980: 2).

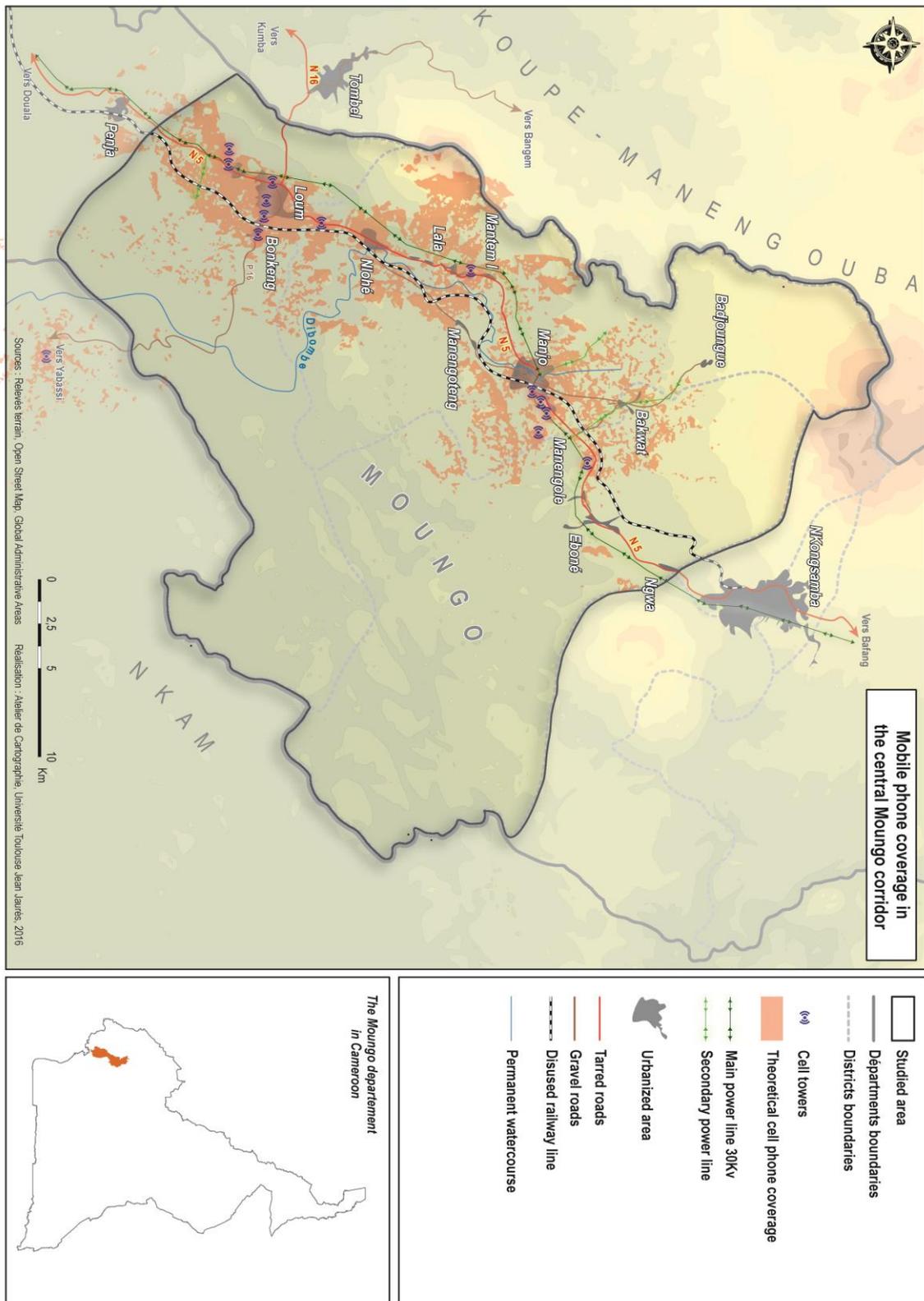


Picture 2. This decayed bridge deck illustrates the constraints that hamper mobility and, therefore, face-to-face meetings. This photography has been taken in Mabombe (district of Loum) in 2016.

Yet, as suggested in the introductory part, the sustaining of relations through time and space is rather delicate. The cost of mobile phones communication has been steadily falling over the past fifteen years (from 500 CFA Francs¹⁰ to 65 CFA Francs on average during peak hours), admittedly, but they remain practically out of range for the 8.1 million people living below the economic poverty line (consult footnote no. 4). Hence the massive recourse to what many authors have called “beeping” or “flashing”: it consists in making contact with a person by calling him/her, letting the phone ring once or twice, before disconnecting (Porter, 2012: 245). As soon as a given personality is seen as affluent (traditional chiefs, company heads, etc.), it is assumed that one has no difficulty to buy credit; so, one is relentlessly invited to call back people with lower status. The decision to re-contact somebody is subordinate to diverse criteria such as the emotional ties that link both communicating persons and the own aspirations of the one who calls back. Beyond this financial dimension, the use of mobile phones is also impeded by the unreliable or impossible access to power supply. Cameroon is still subject to recurrent electricity cuts, whereas the government regularly boasts about having one of the greatest hydroelectric potential of all Africa. Furthermore, some localities, like Mabombe (which is situated right in between Loum and Solé), are not even connected to the grid. The dwellers of such remote places are thus impelled to set up alternative ways of recharging flat batteries: one of these is resorting to use of generators^(B). This has created a new cash earning activity for the owners of generators, to the extent that this type of service is usually not free of charge. Lastly, the quality of mobile network varies markedly from one spot to another (refer to map no. 2 (next page)). This might be explained by two major arguments. Firstly, the territorial distribution of cell towers is totally unequal, with a strong urban bias. The cellular networks operators tend to favour city dwellers because they view them as much more solvent than rural clients.

¹⁰ This data originates from an online Cameroonian newspaper, whose Internet address is indicated hereafter: <http://www.journalducameroun.com/article.php?aid=6130> (Accessed: 06/03/2016).

^(B) This information was given by a lady, who lives in Mabombé and manages simultaneously a farm and a small bar. She was interviewed in February 2016.



Map 2. Theoretical cell phone coverage in the central Moungo valley (coloured in light brown). This map has been drawn using a GPS dataset. Once each base transceiver station has been located, nonetheless, other technical information, such as their orientation and their height, were needed to properly determine where the cellular network is maximum and where it is conversely almost absent. Insofar as no operator has consented to provide us with these details, it has been decided to take into account only the impact of the relief and of the land cover on radio waves.

Besides this commercial strategy, the telecommunication companies are compelled to strengthen the mesh of base transceiver stations in densely populated zones in order to avoid the probable risk of saturation¹¹. Secondly, regardless of the discriminative action of the operators, the radio wave transmitted by the masts may be likely disturbed by the topography, vegetation cover, particular atmospheric conditions and concentration of buildings: all this deforms the theoretical contours of the cell (in a perfect environment, without any obstacles, the frequency may spread within a distance of roughly 30 kilometres) and engenders blind spots^(C). In order to escape such white zones, people travel to nearby places, like a particular street of an agglomeration or the top of a hill, where it is thought that the network coverage is much better.

Now that the role of mobile phones in the preservation of dynamic social bonds and the hurdles related to it (relative dearness of communication rates, discontinuity of the cellular coverage and electric supply) have become clearer, it is high time to describe the methodology used in the study.

4. The predominance of qualitative methods

Because aggregated data on the effects of telecommunication devices in Cameroon are scarce, a localized study that looks in detail at how people use cellular phones to sustain their livelihoods and widen their sphere of possibilities seems appropriate. We have therefore carried out three missions in the Moungo department between 2014 and 2016, during which about a hundred ethnographic narratives have been gleaned. The respondents were selected by means of a convenience sampling technique, a method that involves recruiting only participants who are on-site when the investigator passes from a household to another. It must be allowed that such an instrument leads to salient selection bias, since it restricts itself to individuals who are easily accessible in a given place at a given time; so, it does not permit any generalization of the results to the entire population. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, nonetheless, it has the benefit of simplicity and it is particularly efficient in a homogeneous context (by way of example, the distribution between males and females is balanced in the districts of Loum, Manjo and Éboné¹²). Efforts were made to ensure that people with different socio-professional profiles (agriculturists, students, petty traders, etc.) contribute to the research. Interviews were conducted in the shape of informal conversations (in French or in English), lasting from a few minutes to one or two hours. The discussions were systematically recorded by the aid of the Dictaphone function of a mobile phone. By doing so, we were not bothered by the simultaneous re-transcribing of the talks on a rough book or sheet of paper and could better concentrate on the conversation itself. Another advantage of such *modus operandi* is that the loss of relevant information is far less plausible by using a voice recorder than by putting directly auditions' contents in writing. Once copied out neatly, audio files were erased from the phone memory card in order to protect the answerers' intimacy and avoid unwished dissemination of personal data (in case of snatch theft for instance). The "raw" discourses were then processed using the software *Iramuteq*, a tool that provides statistical treatment of texts. The recourse to such a program was justified by the fact that the corpus was extremely dense (several hundred pages) and was, for this reason, difficult to treat by hand. The advantage of this application was thus to facilitate the comparison of each speech, having regard to the type of words, their recurrence (number of appearances of each term separately) and their co-occurrence (frequency of associations between two specific terms).

¹¹ A single cell tower can process 256 calls per second. In densely populated cities, this threshold may be exceeded quite easily^(C).

^(C) This information was given by an HIS employee. HIS has specialized in building towers and managing sites for mobile network operators (like MTN in Cameroon). He was interviewed in February 2016 in Douala.

¹² This figure comes from the 2005 population census, the last one conducted in Cameroon to date (CBCPS: 2010, 49).

For this to be possible, each text has been previously encoded with variables such as the age, the gender, the profession as well as the living place of the respondents. It becomes thus easier to identify broad tendencies, that is to say, to know if a particular category of people (the youth, the female, the rural dwellers, and so on) has a greater proclivity than the others to express certain feelings, to employ certain expressions, or to relate certain facts or events. Let us envisage that this process reveals that old persons associate more often the usage of cell phones with the reinforcement of intra-family ties than teenagers: such predisposition would not be altogether trivial and should therefore be understood. Although the use of *Iramuteq* has enabled us to optimize the study of the textual data, it does not substitute entirely for the conscientious reading of all the interviews. Indeed, most of content analysis software simplifies the original empirical resources in order to detect similarities or contrasts between them. The interface *Iramuteq* is no exception since it reduces the words to their primary lexical units: by way of example, “I was”, “it is” and “they are” would be allowed for the auxiliary “to be”. Consequently, it risks smoothing out the distinctive feature of each account (such as the figurative language, the reformulation of arguments and the hypothetical contradictions) that are yet crucial to explore the way individuals discursively construct their own reality. To finish with, the platform *Iramuteq* should be considered as an instrument that purveys the scientist preliminary indications about the structure of the addresses; these research tracks are then deepened by means of more conventional methods like the “summative content analysis”. This approach focuses on the underlying context, in which a given sentence is pronounced; it is more an attempt to explore the usage of words (and anecdotes) rather than to study their meanings (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005: 1283-1285). It helps us to answer such question: “Why is the lexical field of trade (i.e., “transport”, “buyers”, “urban customers”, “prices”, “trust”) constantly attached to the handling of cell phones?” The most relevant results that have been derived from this analytic work will be set out in the next sections.

5. An in-depth exploration of mobile phones' usages in the middle Moungo valley

By conscientiously reading over the discourses gleaned over the past three years, we have realized that respondents equate spontaneously the usages of portable phones with two main themes: (5.1.) the coordination of already existing multi-local activities, notably in food supply chains and (5.2.) the mobilization of kith and kin to access “new” economic opportunities or to be assisted in case of material or mental hindrances. In the ensuing sub-parts, these diverse facets of mobile phones' utilization in the middle Moungo corridor will be set out in detail.

5.1. The coordination of already existing multi-local activities

It is already very well established that cellular phones contribute to enhance the circulation of information, notably in food supply chains (Overa, 2006: 1309), such as the one connecting the central Moungo valley to the rest of Cameroon and central Africa. The coordination of such multi-spatial fruits, tubercles and vegetables value chain requires in effect considerable communication between agriculturists, vehicles owners, long-distance lorry drivers, loaders, wholesalers and final clients. But in this field like in others, the usages of cellular phones vary markedly from one actor to another. To start with, purchasers, who are at the heart of foodstuffs distribution, cannot run the risk of losing contact with markets. The demand situation evolves very quickly (sometimes in one single day) and is therefore highly unpredictable. Buyers of bulk merchandise need to know in real time when there is a glut or a shortage of a given agricultural product, because this determines sale rates: the rarer a product is, the higher retail prices are. One of these brokers is Jules ^(D), a *Bayam-Sellam* from Loum who deals in citrus fruits.

^(D) Born in 1974, Jules lives in Loum. He combines two cash-earning activities: he is both a farmer and a wholesaler. He was interviewed in March 2014.

The most visible improvement brought by cell phones, he says, is a greater adaptability vis-à-vis markets fluctuations; to illustrate his argument, he narrated us the following anecdote: “One day, I was at the market in Douala in order to sell oranges. There was a dearth of them in the metropolis and that is the reason why their prices were so high! A friend of mine gave me a ring to take the temperature of the demand. I told him: “There is a scarcity of citrus fruits here. If you manage to get some lots of it, whatever the amount of cash you will disburse in the production area, you have a chance of pocketing gigantic returns!” In the meanwhile, however, four dump trucks full of oranges arrived and provoked market saturation. The value of oranges declined steeply, since the supply was greater than the new demand. So, I had to ring up my partner to tell him that the market trends have unexpectedly reversed”. Another benefit that is instinctively associated by large-scale traders with cableless telephony is the possibility to keep in touch constantly with suppliers, customers and colleagues. Thus, Flaubert ^(E), an itinerant seller specialized in plantains, has recourse to mobile telephones to place an order for cooking bananas: “With cell phones, I can pay my providers an advance and ask them to reserve me some bunches of plantains without having to move”. He also acknowledges that wireless handsets are instrumental in informing regular patrons of his arrival in Douala: “During the travel, I will liaise with my clients again. I will tell them that I am currently on the road, close to Manjo, and that I should be there within two hours”. Super ^(F), a former tailor retrained as a market middleman, also admits the positive influence of battery-powered telecommunications on his activity, notably in his relationship with helpers. He concedes that handheld phones give him the means to assist colleagues with thorny negotiation processes and that the telephone enables him to announce the *catchica* the dispatch of the wares. Contrary to the youngest generation of *Bayam-Sellam*, nonetheless, he is also far more critical and balanced regarding the usages of modern communication technologies in agro-alimentary commerce, as this account vividly evinces: “Even if the *catchica* has been informed by telephone that the bulk cargo has been sent, it is indispensable to accompany the convoy by car. If I do not do this, I might run the risk of being cheated. The *catchica* might lie to me, by stating he has retail something at 5,000 CFA Francs, instead of 10,000 CFA Francs in reality. You cannot be aware of that if you were not on-site to monitor the transaction closely!” Pierre ^(G), whose warehouse is situated at the *Ta’a Macabo* crossroad in Loum, concurs with his colleague’s view: “Agro-commodities should always be escorted by at least one *Bayam-Sellam* to forestall thefts on the road”. The narratives that emanate from these two well-experienced merchants give an insight into the gambles related to the traffic of perishable goods. Market intermediaries are indeed not immune from individuals behaving opportunistically, with the idea of raking in money to the detriment of others. Portable phones do not always safeguard one against such hazards insofar as they might broadcast the lies or false information provided by deceitful collaborators. Technological devices make people closer, admittedly, but they do not create confidence in itself. Trust emerges among those who have agreed to enforce common norms and principles, but many refuse to execute them. The state affords almost no legal protection against such jeopardy and formal traders unions are quasi-inexistent in the surroundings of Loum, Manjo and Éboné. That is the reason why *Bayam-Sellam* are obliged to follow pick-ups and juggernauts from production to consumption centres, thereby guarding against merchandise and cash misappropriations. The drawback of such a situation, nevertheless, resides in the waste of time and financial means that might be saved in a more reliable business environment.

^(E) He lives in Bangem (Southwest Region of Cameroon). He was interviewed in 2014 in Manjo, while loading a truck with plantains.

^(F) These information were given by a male wholesaler, who is nicknamed “Super” and lives in Loum. He was interviewed in March 2014.

^(G) Male wholesaler, who lives in Loum. He was interviewed in February 2014.

Unlike *Bayam-Sellam*, farmers rarely utilize wireless medias to obtain a rundown of market prices. Firstly, the data disseminated over newspapers, radios and voicemail services are not deemed as trustworthy enough by planters. The fulfilment of markets information systems (MIS) throughout sub-tropical Africa has been complicated owing to institutional and technical problems. From a pure institutional perspective, for example, the second-generation MIS (this appellation derives from the fact that they are based on the Internet and cellular telephony) are lacking plausibility because their collaborative nature (everybody may supply them with prices' statements without any assessment) paves the way to misleading statistics and disinformation (David-Benz & al., 90: 2012). Secondly, peasants do not necessarily need to be kept abreast of the demand tendencies to the extent that they hardly ever sell their harvest themselves. Rather, it is the wholesalers and their partners (i.e. loaders, *climbers*, etc.) that take charge of foodstuff from picking or lifting up to the customers' plate. Cell phones therefore serve to bring responses to very concrete preoccupations like the ones enumerated hereafter: "to notify the *asso* that several bunches of plantains are mature"^(D)^(H), "to negotiate the quantity of fruits, vegetables and tubercles to be marketed"^(I) or "to make an appointment with the broker"^(J)^(F). At this point of the paper, it seems relevant to lay stress on the discursive opposition between the defenders and the opponents to *Bayam-Sellam*. On one hand, middle-aged (30-45 years old) and old peasants (above 46 years old) have generally a good opinion of purchasing agents: the latter are verbally constructed as irreplaceable allies, both in business and private life. It has to be specified that the elderly are generally tied to one or several buyers, from whom they might get privileges, gifts and assistance all along the year. For example, it is quite common that the buyers subsidize chemicals and seeds, a favour that counterbalances a little bit the withdrawal of the state from agriculture. Cell phones considerably ease contacts between the producers and their brokers living in town: if the first telephone-mediated conversations ordinarily concentrate on professional aspects, the content of discussions becomes more and more personal with time. In fact, the longer a supplier-wholesaler relationship is, the more it resembles to friendship and the more the content of telephonic dialogues mix commerce into intimacy. Besides, the words used by planters of these generations to refer to market intermediaries are sometimes preceded by possessive adjective (like "My buyer"^(K), "My regular customers"^(J)), which mirrors in some way the strength of the bonds at the top of agricultural commodity chains. The older farmers even forgo the opportunity to earn more money outside these long-lasting trade networks, as the following quotation suggests: "Some years ago, I financed a cocoa producer. We had already agreed on the fact that I should pay 900 CFA Francs for one kilogram of dry cherries. But a competitor came and proposed him a better deal: 1400 CFA Francs per kilo. There was a difference of 500 CFA Francs. Yet, the cocoa grower replied this way: "I cannot sell you my cocoa. I would prefer to leave it for Jules; he will buy it at any price"^(D). This story demonstrates that the market of agro-commodities in Cameroon is not rational at all, but obeys unwritten moral laws that have nothing to do with pure economics. On the other hand, the younger smallholders unveil a more nuanced picture of itinerant merchants. The latter stand accused of putting a downward pressure on purchase rates (some respondents have spoken of "vile prices"^(H)^(L)), which prevent the youth from accumulating money.

^(H) These expressions were used by a young male (30 years old), who lives in Njombé and manages simultaneously a farm and a call-box. He was interviewed in February 2014.

^(I) Male farmer, who lives in Penja. He was interviewed in 2014.

^(J) These utterances were pronounced by a male planter, who lives in Kola. He was interviewed in February 2014.

^(K) This expression was utilized by the traditional chief of Kola, who is also a planter. The interview dates back to 2014.

^(L) Young male agriculturist (29 years old), who lives in Lala (close to Manjo). He was interviewed in March 2014.

The frustration of youngsters is even sharper because the occasions to bypass these controversial middlemen are quite meagre. Peasants are, in effect, not well-known enough in marketplaces, wherein it is indispensable to be co-opted by a truthful promoter, before being allowed to retail food. Another notable disadvantage is that most of them have no transportation means, whereas wholesalers generally keep up special relations with vehicles' owners. Additionally, in the event of substantial, sudden monetary needs (such as a child falling ill) they are forced to sell their harvest cheaply to be sure to get cash as soon as possible. Because of their low age, new agriculturists have had less time than former generation to weave a solidarity network with one or two merchant(s). And, as if that were not sufficient, the state has on no account envisaged improving the remuneration of the peasantry: indeed, it has taken urban populations' side and made every endeavour to maintain the cost of foodstuffs at the lowest level. By doing so, policy makers try in fact to assure social peace (Hatcheu, 2000: 2) and guard against potential hunger riots like the ones of 2008.

5.2. The mobilization of personal networks for economic purposes and solidarity

When asked to explain why it is nowadays unthinkable to do without cellular handsets, F. Bonso, the deputy mayor of Manjo, made this observation: "Mobiles enable me to maintain contact with the external world"^(M). What did he mean by asserting this? In Cameroon, most of the vital resources (salaries, agricultural manpower, farming land, water, employment, etc.) are acquired through informal channels rather than official ones. Before the acute slump of the last century, these assets were swapped, bargained, borrowed or illegally appropriated essentially at the local scale. By way of example, the incomes arising from the plantations allowed some households to live a life of luxury: the margin of coffee production and exportation was not only re-injected in the schooling of pupils, but also in "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen, 2007: 53), that is to say the buying of goods whose overarching goal was to externalize individual fortune. This financial manna made it possible to open up hundreds of shops in Loum, Manjo and Nkongsamba, thereby contributing to livelihoods diversification and urbanization in the Moungo department (Barbier & Al, 1983: 128-131). The end of the second millennium has put a lid on this dynamic of regionally-induced development. There is now a sort of consensus among Africanists about the fact that sub-Saharan citizens increasingly rely on resources from outside to assure their sustenance and start accumulating wealth (Lesourd, 1997: 375; Guétat-Bernard, 1998: 256; Marfaing, 2014: 42). In other terms, the daily life of many families hinges upon migrants remittances (both in cash and in kind). Portable phones make a big difference in calling to expatriates for help. Travelling people are no longer completely absent, since they could be reached nights and days wherever they are; besides, the launch of international prepaid phone cards and roaming services permits speakers, in some way, to free themselves from political limits. The discourses reaped in the Moungo corridor hint at this aid granted by migrants. "I could need to converse with my brother who resides in Equatorial Guinea", says a young widow (27 years old) from Loum. "I could need to inform him of the awful living conditions and woes that I have to face here. From then on, I might expect to be fostered psychologically, morally and financially"^(A). Of course, to really make sense of these utterances, it is unavoidable to take a hard look at the personal biography of the lady. Left alone after her husband died, this mother watches over her three children as well as over her suffering mother. Her revenues come from the plantation, but also from the renting of adjoining apartments.

^(M) Fabien Bonso Lives in Manjo, where he combines many income generating activities (Planter, school teacher, and manager of an Internet café) with his political mandate. He was interviewed in February 2014.

Unfortunately, these income sources are unstable (harvest might be bad, tenants might pile up arrears) and too thin to undertake the incommensurable outgoings linked, for instance, to the remedies of the mother or the education of children¹³. The money remitted from abroad passes through transfer agencies such as *Express Union*, a Cameroonian society that opened its doors in 1997, increased its counters countrywide and gained a foothold in many states from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Rwanda. The pocket telephony has a subsidiary function in such currency flows, since it is only used to notify the recipient that the money can be withdrawn from a given bureau. At this stage in the reflection, it should be added that migrants must sometimes refuse to send money to their acquaintances. To live abroad (or in megapolises) is usually costly and that is why migrants cannot afford to bring succour to everyone. This personal consideration may be misconstrued among those who have remained back home because of the wrong representations and spurious stories that are linked to some destinations. In particular, many prejudices still circulate in Cameroon about the presence of well-remunerated positions and lavish social minimums in the European Union, whereas the snags related to current economic blockages and high cost of living are fully underestimated. The backing offered by emigrated people must not solely be limited to tangible aspects, but also applies to verbal pieces of advice, encouragements and comforting words. By breaking off loneliness, mobile phones are conducive to a better psychological health that is conveyed by self-esteem, meaning in life and a more pronounced sense of well-being.

Another distinguishing feature that is disclosed by qualitative narratives is the beneficial role of cellular handsets in the access to scarce resources. In section 1, the land problems in the Moungo corridor have been already spotlighted. In such a region, wherein reserves of unoccupied space have been reduced to a trickle, the acquisition of a plot for a young farmer seeking independence or for someone striving to enlarge the exploitation is strewn with pitfalls. However, when such occasions arise, people are condemned to act quickly, since there are most of the time masses of pretenders in competition. The statement made by Jules ^(D) is, once again, extremely instructive: “One evening, around 6pm, I was at home. My phone suddenly rang. I replied. It was a friend of mine, who lives in the bush. He told me: “Julio, you should come as soon as possible to Solé! Someone is selling a two-hectare parcel here and if you waste too much time, you might miss this opportunity!” In the same night, I mounted my motorbike. I reached Solé at midnight. The seller needed cash in order to send one of his children to Europe. We came rapidly to an agreement. I suggested to him to come to Loum the next day in order to be paid. Today, I could sell it again three times costlier than the sum I had to pay in the past!” As he points out, the rarity of empty spaces make the purchase prices soar. The sum to be disbursed to buy one hectare in the central Moungo valley might readily reach one million CFA Francs, while the renting of a similar area costs not less than 150,000 per year ^(N).

6. Discussion and conclusion

By meticulously perusing over the previous pages, the title of the paper becomes clearer and clearer. The analysis of individuals' telephone use leaves no doubt that wireless telecommunications have become an essential requisite and an object of success. For instance, wholesalers have recourse to cordless telephones to be updated on market tendencies and chase after temporally circumscribed accumulation occasions.

¹³ To give an overview of school fees in the scrutinized area, we propose considering the case of Carlos, who has seven children. His two daughters and five sons are going either to infant schools, or to primary schools. The enrolment of his children at school comes alone to 150,000 CFA Francs per year. The school supplies, such as the uniforms, workbooks and ball-point pens are also very expensive. He has difficulties to pay for such expenses, since his garage in Manjo gives only meagre returns. Carlos was interviewed in February 2014.

^(N) This information was given by an agronomist working at the Institute of Agricultural Research for Development in Njombé. His interview dates back to March 2014.

Farmers utilize mobiles to inform regular buyers that a given product is ripe and ready to be removed, thereby lessening the risks of being stuck at the farm or crossroads with unsold and rotting merchandize. Beyond the betterments brought by portable phones in agricultural value chains, the ethnographic material also sheds light on the positive role of handheld devices in money and social remittances (ideas, values, beliefs, new ways of designing and organizing activities, etc.) within families that function more and more like domestic diasporas. To end with, battery-powered communications appreciably speed up the identification of temporally circumscribed possibilities as the very last case proves.

Of course, this is not to overestimate the weight of cellular telephones in Cameroonian's everyday existence. Modern communications facilitate the maintenance and exploitation of spatially dispersed social networks, admittedly, but they do not entirely substitute for corporeal mobility. As the British sociologist J. Urry affirms, bodily displacements are essential for constituting social and economic life and are not an optional add-on (Urry, 2002: 263). For instance, the inception of a new partnership between a peasant and a *Bayam-Sellam* requires face-to-face meetings to appraise each other's integrity. In other words, future associates need to note their body language, to look at each other's eyes, to develop extended relations of trust among them. The evaluation of the excellence of agro-commodities also takes place on-site^(L), because it supposes inspecting the size and external appearance (colour, absence of blots, and so on) of products. Similar remarks might be done for the rapports between migrants and immobile persons. Indeed, if it should be recognized that cell phones enable individuals to catch-up on relatives' news and appeal for advices and help, it should also not be forgotten that the deplorable quality (inaudible voice, interferences) and prices of long-distance telecommunications prevent people from talking too long on their phones. Cell phones actually allow very short, clear-cut and unequivocal requests, while deep interactions and warm moments among family members need physical movements.

All the arguments put forward in this paper have tremendous consequences on the way we conceptualize the rural and the urban spaces. Countrysides and cities have been thought, for quite a long while, as strictly separated entities that are connected by bidirectional flows of liquidity, merchandize, services, information and workforce. As a consequence, researchers have until recently put a special emphasis on the transformations brought by these material and immaterial streams on both, the sending and the receiving ends. To put it another way, the stake was in those days the effects of flux rather than the flux themselves¹⁴. This approach is, however, insufficient, and possibly a prejudicial error, since it does not devote enough attention to who is actually performing movements and why a given person is involved in any kind of exchange. No interaction emerges *ex-nihilo*, whether it is a physical journey, a money transfer or a phone conversation. Rather, contact and cooperation occur in the framework of survival or accumulation strategies or, at least, of more or less discernible targets. In this regard, the cases developed in the preceding reflection are very eloquent to the extent that they show how the weaving and the preservation of spatially dispersed ties across the city/countryside dichotomy are instrumental in improving livelihoods. The wholesalers, for example, have spun a wide web of suppliers and clients that is materialized by regular displacements and use of mobile phones and thanks to which they manage to profit from both the agrarian (low-cost food) and the urbanized regions (better purchasing power of customers and hence higher returns). In sum, by transcending daily the rural/urban divide, brokers, as well as the other players mentioned in the inquiry, contribute to lend weight to the idea of a "rurban" area of practice. Such a mode of existence cannot be properly described using a classic territorial framework, since this implies taking into account the flexible nature of life spaces.

¹⁴ A very illustrative case study showing this "quasi-obsession" for the consequences of the circulation of resources between the towns and the countries is provided by Oded Stark. This economist has discussed in the 1980s the repercussion of the wealth transferred by emigrants on the economic development of their rural homes. The complete reference of this paper may be retrieved in the bibliography.

Local expressions	Significance and details
<i>Bayam-Sellam</i>	This expression refers to wholesalers in Cameroonian pidgin. It is formed using the English verbs “to buy” and “to sell”.
<i>Benskinners</i>	It is a synonym of “motor-taxi driver”.
<i>Call-boxers</i>	A <i>call-boxer</i> is someone who manages a phone booth. The profiles of call-boxers range from civil servants who have lost their jobs during the austerity period to young, well-educated women who have trouble integrating formal labour market.
<i>Development committees</i>	This expression hints at associations that gather together people with a common geographic origin. The ambition of such clubs is to finance basic infrastructures (roads, power lines, public fountains, schools, etc.) in the rural home. Its budget derives from the annual contributions of all the members: everyone gives as much money as possible, proportionally to one’s revenue.
<i>Catchica</i>	This word pertains to the partners of wholesalers. They are, among other things, entrusted with the mission of receiving the merchandise sent by <i>Bayam-Sellam</i> to a given town.
<i>Climber</i>	<i>Climbers</i> are tasked with the picking of fruits (palm nuts for example) on top of trees.
<i>Asso</i>	The term <i>asso</i> is the diminutive of “associate”. It is often preferred to other terms such as “partner”, “colleague” or even “associate”. The <i>asso</i> is someone’s most faithful and unfailing collaborator.

Table 1. Local expressions and their meaning.

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