

The Cell Phone and the Nigerian Immigrants in Anglophone Cameroon

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Introduction.

It is less than two decades since the cell phone was introduced in Africa, but as it has become so popular that its 'newness' is likely to be forgotten. In fact the ubiquitous availability of the cell phone may tend to give the misleading impression that it has always been around as evidenced by the fantasy expressed by some its users that people cannot live without it (Nyamnjoh 2009). Its possession and even use that were defined by social status when the cell phone first appeared have now become a more or less free for all. Although some traditional forms of African communication are still limping along with the cell phone, it is only a matter time before they are relegated to the background given the enthusiasm with which the cell phone is embraced. The phenomenal popularity of the cell phone derives from its importance in today's globalized world. For instance, besides its economic role in generating new avenues of employment, (Nkwi 2009) the cell phone also reinforces old relationships by linking people who are far away, (Nyamnjoh); and shapes relationships in society (Horst & Miller 2006, Brinkman and de Bruijn (2009).

As an instrument for connecting people near and far, the cell phone is crucially related to mobility, that is, spatial mobility in particular migration. Irrespective of the distance, one can still stay connected with kith and kin back home through the cell phone. In this way the feeling of absence is mitigated. Though important, staying connected does not seem to be the only way in which the cell is related to or impacts on migration/migrants. What, for instance, is the relationship between the cell phone and the migrants' survival strategies. Put differently, is the cell phone an asset or a liability to the migrants in the host society? This study considers the impact and appropriation of the mobile phone by the Nigerian immigrants in Anglophone Cameroon. The thrust of the argument is that the cell phone is an indispensable asset to the Nigerian migrants in Anglophone Cameroon. They appropriate the cell phone in solving a number of migrant-related problems.

The Anglophone Cameroon is made up of two(North-West and South–West) of the ten provinces/regions into which Cameroon is divided for administrative purposes.. During the colonial period, that is before 1961, what is today Anglophone Cameroon was known as the British Southern Cameroons and was administered as part of the British colony of Nigeria. As such, there was an influx of Nigerians into the territory resulting in the domination of its administration, trade and commerce by Nigerians. Although the influx of Nigerians immigrants was not unusual since there was free movement from other parts of Nigeria into the territory, but the domination of the administration and the economy by the Nigerians was nevertheless, irritating to, and resented by the local population. The resentment of the Nigerian domination was manifested in the 1961 plebiscite in which the population opting to unify with the French-speaking *La Republique du Cameroun* rather than integrate with Nigeria (Amazee 1990).

Unification of the Southern Cameroons and French Cameroon turned the Nigerians in the territory from de facto citizens to de jure foreigners. As foreigners, a number of discriminatory measures were instituted against them. These measures included the acquisition of a residence permit, prohibition from public service and related employment and restrictions from engaging in certain economic activities. But the greatest problem of the migrants was and still is, not so much with the officially established measures as with their harassment by law enforcement officials (police and gendarmes). It should be noted here that the harassment of the Nigerians by the gendarmes in the Bakassi peninsular was the immediate cause of the conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria over legitimacy the ownership of the peninsular.

The harassment which has become the characteristic attitude of the police and gendarmes toward the Nigeian immigrants, is mainly for the purpose of extorting money though under the guise of controlling ensuring the legitimacy of the immigrants. It takes several forms. First, although the official cost of the permit is currently FCFA 120,000 the immigrants claim that they usually spend about FCFA 135,000 because of what the officials refer to as charges but which are not reflected in the receipts. Second, even after paying for the permit it is usually not issued immediately, but the applicant is given a receipt. It could take as long as one to two months after payment before the permit is issued. According to local immigration officials, the delay is caused by Yaounde in sending the forms on which the permits are printed. But the immigrants claim that the delay is intentionally imposed as a means of attracting bribes from them. As evidence, they adduce the fact that in the interim, the police usually refuse to honour the receipt as representing the permit arguing that a receipt is not a permit and therefore that the migrant is irregular and should 'negotiate'. Third, although the duration of the permit is twelve months, the police usually regard permits as having expired two months to expiring date and harass holders of such permits as being irregular. Four, the police regularly raid the houses of the immigrants at night and on such occasions each adult must pay FCFA10,000 for those whose documents are regular, and FCFA 25,000 for those whose documents are 'irregular', failing which they are taken to the police office where they would spend more for their freedom .As recounted one of the immigrants:

We are at the whims and caprices of the police and gendarmes at every turn, on the highway at home and at the market place. It suffices for a policeman or gendarme to identify you as a Nigerian. He will develop any excuse to extort money from you. On the highway he will ask you to come out of the vehicle and follow him. He takes your documents and even if he finds them to be correct, he holds on to them and makes as if he has forgotten about you and goes on to handle other cases. He keeps them as long as you do not understand, or refuse to understand what he wants. And you dare not ask him to give back your documents because to do so will be interpreted as challenging him on his job with serious consequences for you. And so, the only way out is to propose an amount of money as a starting point for negotiating your liberty.(Interviewed by researcher July 10, 2009).

The Role of the Cell Phone

The cost of the residence permit which is currently fixed at FCFA120, 000 per adult person is beyond the reach of especially those immigrants with large families. Consequently, most of them send their grown-up children and in certain cases, their wives back home. As one of them put it, 'When things became difficult, I decided to send my wife and children back home because with my cell phone I can easily call to know their needs and how they are doing' (Interviewed by

research July 10, 2009)

Moreover, given that the immigrants are constantly harassed the need for Concerted action becomes imperative and in this case the cell phone becomes indispensable in getting vital information across to members. For this purpose, they are organized in the Nigerian Union which is the mechanism through which they channel their problems to the Nigerian Consulate in Buea. The cell phone is very useful in situations that need immediate attention. According to the Public Relations officer at the Nigerian Consulate in Buea:

the cell phone is invaluable because it facilitates communication and enables quick and immediate attention to problems that would in the absence of it take weeks if not months to be attended to. For example, two weeks ago the president of the Nigerian Union in Mundemba phoned us at about 3 pm on a Friday and complained that one of his members was arrested and being detained by the police on false charges of arms importation. We immediately contacted the Senior Divisional Officer of Ndian Division who investigated the matter and found that it was, in reality, a false accusation and got the man released on same day (Interviewed by researcher August 20, 2009).

The responds also revealed that their cell phones are useful in helping them escape from the police raids in their houses at night. Once any of them sees the police approaching he signals the rest of them to take cover, and in that way save the money they would have given to the police. For this purpose they have a special ring tone known by all of them including wives and children. 'Once that tone rings', one of the immigrants explained, 'you know precisely what it means without necessarily answering the call' (Interviewed by researcher September 15, 2009). Some respondents said that because of the certainty of being harassed on the high way by the police and gendarmes, they often avoid traveling and as such, prefer to order their goods from their customers through the phone.

In the past, the immigrants were often accused of not respecting local authorities and tradition especially with regard to talking to the traditional ruler (Fon) in the Northwest region. To greet or open a conversation with the Fon requires the individual to softly make three claps his hands while taking a slight-stooping posture. But since such a formality cannot be performed in a phone conversation or greeting, the immigrants now converse with the Fon on the cell phone without being accused of disrespecting tradition.

The Immigrants also use the cell phone to coordinate their business activities. According to one of them who is in the fishing industry 'the cell phone is very useful to me and my boys because whenever any of them misses their way during a fishing trip they would phone me and I would give direct them, from wherever I may be, how to find their way home' (ibid).

Conclusion

The cell phone is to the Nigerian immigrants in Anglophone Cameroon much more than an instrument of voice communication. It is also an instrument for negotiating their survival as well as social relations in the host society.

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