

Images of Nyongo amongst Bamenda Grassfielders in Whiteman Kontri

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses the experiences and discourses of transnational migrants from the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. It uses Nyongo, a popular form of witchcraft that privileges zombification over instant gratification through instant and total death, to seek to illustrate how the tensions occasioned by everyday witchcraft offer migrants and their communities the opportunity to interrogate, adapt to, reject or appropriate new ideas of being acquired through encounters with difference. The paper thus attempts to capture not only what it means to see oneself as a victim of Nyongo, but to detail the contradictions involved with inhabiting spaces that conjure images of Nyongo. While not primarily about potent witchcraft fears, violence and afflictions, the paper does point to how the metaphorical and sometimes joking self-image of zombiehood by Bamenda Grassfielders in the diaspora offers a discursive resource among others for ongoing negotiations of belonging, personal success and expectations. The paper argues that the collectivist notions of success from which migrants and their home communities draw are such as to warrant accusations, counter-accusations, and images of Nyongo as a way of seeking a healthy balance between marginalization and exploitation, social responsibility and personal success, home of origin and home of refuge. The accusatory language of victimhood employed by migrants to describe their subjection and ultra-exploitation by forces at home and in the host countries is evidence that, to them, home is neither simply to be found “at home” or “away from home”.*

Introduction

Scholarship on witchcraft has tended to focus too narrowly on its violent and destructive dimensions, thereby leading some to conclude that “a world of witchcraft is ultimately dystopian” (Karlström, 2004). Inadequately stressed are the aspects of witchcraft that emphasize interdependence and conviviality without obfuscating the individual or collective aspirations to dream, fantasize and explore new dimensions of being. A closer look at the everyday discourses and practices of Cameroonians suggests that witchcraft is about much more than just the dark side of humanity. As a multidimensional phenomenon, witchcraft is best studied as a process in which violent destruction and death are rare and extreme exceptions, employed mostly when all attempts at negotiating conviviality

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between the familiar and the undomesticated have been exhausted. Using Nyongo, a popular form of witchcraft that privileges zombification over instant gratification through instant and total death, this paper seeks to illustrate how the tensions occasioned by everyday witchcraft offer individuals and communities the opportunity to interrogate, adapt to, reject or appropriate new ideas of being acquired through encounters with difference.

Nyongo is a dynamic, flexible, fluid and common form of witchcraft among the coastal and Grassfields peoples of Cameroon. Amongst these peoples, one is accused of Nyongo when he or she is perceived to have appropriated or attempted to appropriate the life essence of another person, occasioning a sudden and often mysterious “temporary” death. It is claimed that those capable of Nyongo benefit from the afflicted by harnessing the abilities of the latter to slave for them as zombies after their presumed death. Nyongo also refers to the mysterious place(s) where victims of fierce greed—Nyongo—are said to be slaving away, visible mostly to slavedrivers or to those who have consigned them to slavery. As Edwin Ardener observed when he first encountered this form of witchcraft among the Bakweri in the 1950s, “it is believed that a person possessing it is able to kill others, especially his own relatives, and to use their bodies to work for him in an invisible town on Mount Kupe in Bakossi country” (Ardener, [1960] 1996, p. 216). If dead people can work, theirs must be a soft form of death, not the violent and total type that comes with the graphic and violent images of witchcraft as dystopia. With Nyongo, there is a strong association between “dying children and the ownership” of property (sterile accumulation that stalls social reproduction) akin to the “modern conveniences” which the Bakweri associated with the Nyongo people of Mount Kupe, who even had “motor lorries”, a rare commodity before independence (Ardener, [1970] 1996, pp. 248–249), that could only reach Cameroon by sea and via ship. In the 1950s, “Nyongo people could best be recognized by their tin houses which they had been able to build with the zombie labour force of their dead relatives” (Ardener, [1970] 1996, p. 248; see also Geschiere, 1997, pp. 146–158). Distinctively “foreign” and rare at the time, tin houses were by every indication a new status symbol that threatened the status quo and its idea of “home” with the prospect of the rise of a new elite in tune with values from elsewhere. Hence the desperate attempts to contain the perceived dangers to social order, even if by borrowing the regulatory institutions of others, as the Bakweri did to the Obasinjom of the Banyangi in 1955 and 1956 (Ardener, [1970] 1996, pp. 250–253; Geschiere, 1997, pp. 146–151).

If in the colonial period Nyongo was best epitomized by the prominent, sinister Mount Kupe and the coastal region (with its vast mysterious expanse of sea water, gateway into new ways of being and belonging) as part of the fertile crescent that attracted investors, slave and migrant labour from around and beyond, in postcolonial Cameroon, by contrast, rapid urbanization has often exposed villagers to greater towns, even dazzling them with “modern conveniences” beyond the legendary allure of the invisible town and plantations beneath Mount Kupe. People continue to disappear from villages into towns as migrant labour, and from the towns within into cities abroad, seeking greener pastures and the amenities harvested from them. As with the Nyongo of old when mostly children were sacrificed, today it is usually the able-bodied youth who are forced by relationships of expectations and exploitation to migrate to towns and abroad as opportunity seeking labour. Some return old and faded, hardly recognizable culturally and physically by anyone, because they left their villages as children and were counted for dead, and so are best related to as not belonging, ghosts back to haunt the living with disturbing memories.

Others, for various reasons, including bitterness, sheer depletion and new ideas of home, never return. Once communication has dried up completely, they are considered dead even by those who had sacrificed them into a life of slavery as zombies. Their enhancement by new horizons has been achieved at the expense of active relationships with a place called home.

Central to understanding the cosmopolitan credentials of Nyonggo is the obsession among Cameroonians with “modern conveniences” (Ardener, [1970] 1996, pp. 248–249) or “modern forms of consumerism” (Geschiere, 1997, pp. 138–139), characterized by a “proverbial” craving for “everything that is imported rather than produced locally”, as the ultimate symbol of status (Warnier, 1993, pp. 162–196), even if this is achieved at the expense of harmony with kin. In this paper, I argue that Cameroonians from the Bamenda Grassfields, pushed into the cities and Whiteman Kontri to seek greener pastures and modern conveniences, increasingly perceive themselves as being in and victims of Nyonggo, thanks mainly to relatives who are exceedingly demanding in their expectations of remittances, yet who care very little for the welfare and predicaments facing their zombies abroad, where being a human with rights and dignity is a luxury few can afford in reality. The tensions engendered by this situation result in ambivalent attitudes towards home, especially among those opened to new possibilities and less taxing forms of belonging, however dim. As Harri Englund argues in relation to Pentecostal Christians in Malawi, “the cosmopolitan imagination emerges when there is unease or uncertainty about the ‘home’ that most immediately imposes itself upon the subject”, forcing it to renegotiate a problematic belonging that is narrowly cast in geographical and biological terms, in favour of home as a set of comforting practices and relationships (Englund 2004, pp. 296–297). Increasingly uncomfortable with unrealistic expectations from their homes of origin and feeling less than welcome in their host communities, Bamenda Grassfielders abroad—like souls trapped in Limbo—employ the language of victimhood to come to terms with their predicament, while inviting others to outgrow narrow, essentialist and opportunistic notions of belonging. Although not an undifferentiated category, Bamenda Grassfielders abroad are thus able, through the language of Nyonggo, to capture their tensions with home and host communities, using their own encounters and experiences to argue for more flexible, negotiated, relational, and realistic ideas of belonging founded less on the essence of geography and biology than on conviviality and a shared humanity.

If Nyonggo signifies mysterious places where modern conveniences and inconveniences co-exist in superabundance, Grassfielders have increasingly discovered such places by degree, and in accordance with the possibilities offered them by new information and communication technologies. First the lorry made it possible for them to discover the infinite marvels and dangers of plantation agriculture in coastal Cameroon, thereby enriching their vocabulary with the reality of attraction and depletion embedded in concepts such as Kupe and Nyonggo. With better roads and increased mobility such places became less mysterious, more visible and real as predatory sites of accumulation, where one slaved away without relent, and where the ultimate sacrifice of a second and final death (in other words, permanent relocation to a new, invisible and inaccessible home) was ever looming. Still, more technological advances (airplane, television, Internet and cellphone) have taken Nyonggo further afield into distant foreign lands and virtual spaces, as families and communities sacrifice sons and daughters to forage for opportunities in the birthplaces of modern conveniences, while at the same time multiplying opportunities both for accountability and opportunism.

As evident from complaints by diasporic Cameroonians, the expectations of modernity through consuming foreign goods have engendered highly mercantilist attitudes by kin and acquaintances determined to treat those in the diaspora essentially as disposable wallets on legs. They feel as if they are made to atone for the sins of a “sorcerer state” out of gear with popular expectations (cf. Hours, 1985; Rowlands & Warnier, 1988; Nyamnjoh, 2001), by kin and friends compelling them to assume responsibilities well above their means, capabilities and the call of duty. While ordinarily there may be mistrust about how people come by their wealth, few in Cameroon seem to worry about how their kin and friends abroad acquire the modern conveniences or remittances, which they are expected to make available regularly. A Grassfields student in Germany captured this superbly: “When it comes to demanding from those abroad, most people back home keep their conscience and reasoning aside”. Nyongo may be a world of abundance, but such abundance comes at a price: the humanity of those sacrificed to slave away as zombies, and the risk of disharmony with the home village. The acute sense of double exploitation (by their “home of origin” and “home of refuge”) among diasporic Cameroonians generates critical discourses of complaint and helplessness that make them see themselves as zombies *par excellence*, and to wish for more flexible ideas of what it means to feel at home. Yet this is quite paradoxical, since ordinarily, given their presumed relative material success in the “invisible” towns and cities beyond—*vis-à-vis* family and friends back home—they are those most likely to be accused of practicing Nyongo. This might mean that with the help of the latest technologies of information and communications, it is possible for zombies in Whiteman Kontri, who otherwise would be totally powerless *vis-à-vis* witches and their ability to access the invisible, to regain their agency to explore new ways of being and belonging.

The paper thus attempts to capture not only what it means to see oneself as victim of Nyongo, but to detail the contradictions involved with inhabiting spaces that conjure images of Nyongo. While the paper is not primarily about potent witchcraft fears, violence and afflictions, it does point to how the metaphorical and sometimes joking self-image of zombiehood by Bamenda Grassfielders in the diaspora offers a discursive resource among others for ongoing negotiations of belonging, personal success and expectations. The paper argues that the collectivist notions of success from which migrants and their home communities draw are such as to warrant accusations, counter-accusations, and images of Nyongo as a way of seeking a healthy balance between marginalization and exploitation, social responsibility and personal success, home of origin and home of refuge. Empirical substantiation is provided by interviews with and personal experiences of Bamenda Grassfielders in Europe and Southern Africa, collected through face-to-face and electronic interactions thanks to flexibility mobility.

The Bamenda Grassfields and Nyongo

In the Bamenda Grassfields, notions such as Nyongo, Kupe and Famla are common currency in local languages, thanks to a history of involvement with other regions through migration, slavery, plantation agriculture, and urbanization. Regardless of nomenclature, throughout Cameroon the distinctive feature of this type of witchcraft is that its witches are less keen on making an instant meal than a short-, medium- or long-term investment by transforming their victims into zombies who are then made to slave for them on “invisible plantations” (Geschiera, 1997, pp. 139–168), invisible supermarkets and other avenues

of accumulation serviced by devalued and largely undocumented labour. In such witchcraft, the emphasis is less on blood dripping violence or death as on keeping one's victims alive and taxing them hard. The option to postpone instant gratification is a risky one of course, since the zombie could turn out to be a bad investment by provoking inquisitions that claim the lives of those who plant them in Nyongo, and/or by being stubborn and unpredictable. No condition is permanent, not even zombiehood, and it is always a risk keeping for tomorrow and out of reach what could serve as an instant meal. As we remark below, the perceived adventurism, opportunism, callous indifference and consumer obsessions of home-based Cameroonians have increasingly come under sharp criticism by their diasporic acquaintances, friends and kin, who feel utterly diminished by the multiple dimensions of subjection and ultra-exploitation imposed on them by their host and home communities. Present-day zombies—especially those in urban centres and Whiteman Kontri—appear to be very much alive, not at all dead or deprived of agency in negotiating conviviality between competing and conflicting expectations on their labour and its proceeds. They are conscious and active participants in their own exploitation, in the hope of graduating eventually into a life of comfort informed by flexible (deterritorialized and deracialized) ideas and practices of home and belonging. In this sense, they are quite unlike the plantation zombies of Mount Kupe, whose labour was exploited without their consent, and who had no opportunity of communicating with the home village without passing through the very witches who had placed them in Nyongo. Today, not only are witches at the cutting-edge of technological developments, their zombies are even more so, and can ably resort to the same technologies to outsmart or at least to temper the excessive claims by witches on their energies. But as the saying goes, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

If the emphasis in colonial Cameroon was on invisible plantations and the transportation of victims by lorries, given the prominence of plantation agriculture and the aggressive manner in which the German owners initially went about recruiting labour (Chilver & Roschenthaler, 2001), in postcolonial Cameroon the emphasis has shifted to foreign lands of abundant but dangerous wealth (that are generally inaccessible), and to the plane and television as the premier vehicles of consumer fantasies. Discourses of witchcraft would appear to be closely shaped by the dominant forms of economy and by the impact of the latest technologies of (virtual or real) accessibility. As is evident from interviews with diasporic Grassfielders, advances in information and communication technologies have not only enabled witches to send their zombies further afield (thereby maximizing their chances of further enrichment even if at the risk of eventually losing the zombies to new forms of being and belonging), but also offered them the possibility of keeping their zombies permanently on a leash and on their toes with infinite demands through the Internet and cellphone, tracking down and holding to ransom even the most recalcitrant of these zombies. Accounts of home-based witches boarding invisible planes to foreign cities in Europe to track down recalcitrant zombies are quite common (Nyamnjoh, 2001, pp. 38–42). However, this paper is less about perceived “witches” using new technologies to inflict violence than about facilitating accumulation and the redistribution of personal success through such technologies and by keeping their victims alive for as long as there is the hope of the latter being useful, however reluctantly.

Since the bulk of informants for this study were diasporic Bamenda Grassfielders, it is only appropriate to start by showing how Nyongo compares with similar forms of witchcraft in their region. By way of example, I have adopted the notion of Msa

as employed in Bum. Given that since colonial times, the greatest export from the Bamenda Grassfields has been cheap migrant labour, first to the agro-plantations of coastal Cameroon (cf. Konings, 1993; Chilver & Roschenthaler, 2001), and now increasingly to Europe, North America, Southern Africa and elsewhere, and given how very little urbanization in the region has been informed by industrialization, it is particularly important to examine the significance of Nyongo or Msa in the region and among its sons and daughters in towns, cities and abroad. Witchcraft in many ways remains the long arm of family and village communities seeking to negotiate the redistribution of achievements in modern conveniences by their sons and daughters in distant cities and foreign lands (cf. Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 1998). It is also the vehicle used by those at the forefront of the hunt for modern conveniences in cities and foreign lands to promote flexible and dynamic citizenship informed by the riches of mobility and encounters.

In the Bamenda Grassfields, people differentiate between various categories of witchcraft. There, witchcraft is as much a source and resource of personal and collective power or powerlessness as it is a call for “domesticated agency” (interdependence and conviviality) against various forms of exploitation, marginalization, inequality and individualism. Indeed, the fact that witchcraft accusations usually occur between kin is indicative of how much people in the region are bound up in issues of solidarity, intimacy, trust and the extent to which they are implicated in anxieties surrounding social reproduction. Nearly everyone is eager to maintain kin networks, much as some in town or abroad might contemplate or explore cosmopolitan alternatives to the perceived extravagance of expectations by kin and the home village. Thus, even witches forced to sever links with kin and home community seek alternatives in their “new” cosmopolitan community of witches.

To most people in Bum, everyone is either born with “clairvoyance” (*seba* = two eyes) or “innocence” (*seimok* = one eye). The “clairvoyant” has the ability (sing. *fintini*; plur. *fintitu*) to see and do beyond the capability of the innocent. Clairvoyants are clever (manipulative and slippery) (sing. *Wutatoffana* = person of sense; plur. *Ghetatoffana*), the innocent shortsighted, incapable and, at times, foolish. “To see” (*Yen*), when used to distinguish between the clairvoyant and the innocent, means the ability to perceive even the invisible. The former sees (*Yenalo*), and the latter sees not (*Yenawi*).

A clairvoyant might be associated either with *Awung* or *Msa*. *Awung* (pl. *uwung*) are further subdivided into: wise person (sing. *awungadzunga* = good *awung*; pl. *uwungudzungu*); and sorcerer (sing. *awungabe* = bad *awung*; pl: *uwungube*). *Msa* or cunning (sing. *Wutamsa* = person of *Msa*; pl. *ghetamsala*) is subdivided into: sly (sing. *wutamsamdzung* = good person of *Msa*; pl. *ghetamsamdzungu*); and villain (sing. *wutamsamba* = bad person of *Msa*; pl. *ghetamsambe*). The innocent comprise: medium (sing. *wut-ni-toffotu* = person with intelligence; pl. *gheta-ni-toffotu*); and inept (sing. *ayung*, *ngwo*, *mumu* = person capable of nothing great; pl: *wuyung*, *wungwo*, *wumumu*).

Awung is identifiable mainly through words and action. Sorcerers, seen as jealous and destructive, “eat” or deplete their victims mysteriously. Their victims must be kin, as they are expected to prove intimacy, and it is dangerous to victimize strangers. Sorcerers can enhance their clairvoyance with medicine or magic that protects them against fellow sorcerers and against diviners, with whom relations are of mutual fear and distrust. If sorcerers seek to sever links with kin, diviners straddle the worlds of kinship and sorcery.

Msa is also an omnipresent mysterious world of beauty, abundance, marvels and infinite possibilities, inhabited by very wicked, hostile and vicious people known as devils

(*deblisu*). It is visible only to the “cunning” who alone can visit it anytime, anywhere, and who can conjure it up to appear for the innocent to glimpse. Possible everywhere, Msa is, above all, an ambivalent place where good and bad, pleasure and pain, utopia and dystopia are all intertwined. Its inhabitants are both the source of admiration and envy, especially for their material abundance. Msa is like a market, complete with traders and buyers, a bazaar where many come but where, unfortunately, few are rewarded with clear-cut choices. To get what one wants, one must bargain and pay for it. But the only currency in Msa is the human being, euphemistically known as “goat” or “fowl”. Villains tether their victims at Msa like goats or fowl, hoping for the best while risking the worst, as everything good or bad from Msa is believed to proliferate like a virus once acquired. But to acquire anything, it must be paid for in full, and those who fail to honour their debts must pay with their lives. Payment once agreed cannot be revoked. This is why, while at Msa, the “sly”, who are more sensible, hesitate to promise payment or to become indebted.

Msa has a way of luring its victims, first with fantasies and marvels (utopia), then with the harsh reality of exploitation and contradictions (dystopia). As Beben Ktkeh of Fonfuka puts it:

At Msa, you are first shown only the good, the fantastic, the marvellous. This normally attracts you. Then you are trapped and caught. And you die. It is after death that you are shown the . . . bad and distasteful aspect of it. . . . [A]fter your death, you are enslaved completely: you are ill-treated, overworked, discriminated against . . . Sometimes its inhabitants use you as a pillow on their beds, ask you to work on their farms, to carry water for them, wash their dishes and so on. And you do all this work when their own children and themselves do just nothing.

The personal success Msa appears to offer is ultimately illusory; so, also, is the semblance of a new solidarity and a counter-community it creates in individuals by encouraging them to sacrifice kin and traditional alliances. When the chips are down, Msa’s true ethos—greed and callous indifference—come to the fore, and individuals must make the ultimate sacrifice: their own lives. The surest and safest relationship with Msa lies not in the permanent severing of links with kin, but rather in the negotiated belonging which the “wise” and the “sly” epitomize: building bridges of conviviality linking home and exile, utopia and dystopia.

It is hard to resist seeing Msa as analogous to modern capitalism as exemplified by Whiteman Kontri, especially when experienced on the periphery. While local beliefs in Msa predate the transatlantic slave trade, and communication between the Grassfields and the coastal regions predates colonialism and plantation agriculture, current narratives on witchcraft in the Grassfields are heavily coloured by the symbols and associations of capitalism. True, Nyong cannot be explained by the impact of capitalism alone, but it cannot be explained without it. It is not an accident that Nyong or Msa is also closely associated with Mount Kupe, which for long epitomized the region where able-bodied men disappeared to slave away in plantations, with some never returning at all or coming home too old to be recognized by those who grew up or aged in their absence.

Msa, like Nyong is a statement against endangering moral community and against capitalism’s illusion of the permanence of personal success. Like capitalism, Msa or Nyong, when undomesticated, brings power and opportunities to only a few—those with the clairvoyance and greed to indulge in it. Like global capitalism, the unharnessed pursuit

of Msa or Nyongo enhances self-seeking individuals at the expense of family and community. But such success is merely an illusion because, like consumer capitalism, Msa or Nyongo is seemingly an eternal cycle of indebtedness, manipulation, zombification and the never-ending search for fulfilment. The appetites it brings only grow stronger, and those who yield to its allure are instantly trapped and ultimately consumed, but not before consuming their own and others' sociality. Distinctions between categories of witchcraft are precisely an attempt at mitigating the dystopia of engaging with utopia. Msa or Nyongo as consumer capitalism is simultaneously an aspiration, a relationship and a location, which to most Cameroonians are best embodied in "Whiteman Kontri" (Europe and North America mainly) (cf. Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002).

Whiteman Kontri as Nyongo

Bamenda Grassfielders abroad compare Whiteman Kontri to Nyongo and liken themselves to victims of Nyongo. It is common to call and ask to speak to someone and be told he or she "has gone to work Nyongo", meaning that they have to offer devalued and highly exploited labour at factories, as cleaners, maids, security guards or prostitutes, sweating and toiling round the clock, just to make ends meet. I was first intrigued by this comparison among undocumented Grassfielders in Italy, and as I discussed further with others, I realized the comparison was indeed widespread. But Cameroonians also use Nyongo to capture the excessive demands for remittances and consumer items by people who are not always family or friends, and who do not care much about them as human beings. This widely shared perception of Whiteman Kontri as Nyongo was well brought out by Robert, an MA holder albeit unemployed Grassfielder married to a Dane (who was pregnant with their first child) and based in Copenhagen, where he works as a cleaner when he is lucky. In addition to his own predicament, he uses the example of toiling Ghanaian migrants whom Arhinful (2001), in a recent study in Amsterdam, has observed are always thinking of and sending remittances to relatives back home, regardless of their personal circumstance. In many an African country, Ghana, for example, remittances far surpass what the state receives in foreign aid:

Whenever friends call and ask me about Denmark I always say "this place na Nyongo place". It may not have to do with supernatural powers as such, but the results according to me, are fairly the same—accumulating money. I think there is little difference between someone who works and earns a lot of money but buys few clothes and a Nyongo man who eats the cheapest food from the cheapest restaurant. The insecurity one faces abroad has made it possible that people keep accumulating money without knowing if they would ever spend it. If you were to visit Copenhagen you would see Ghanaians with their baggy trousers sleeping in trains because they work at least 10 hours a day all the days of the week. It would not be strange to see them eat biscuits and drink water for lunch. It would not be strange to see them running and chewing dry bread in order to catch a train to work. How can one compromise that such men earn Kr1000 per day and spend about Kr25 per day for food? And at the end of it all, they go to Western Union money transfer to attend to the impossible demands from home. It is on these grounds that I often feel most people belong to Nyongo.

Julia of Basel, a BA holder but unemployed mother of three who is married to a Swiss university lecturer, echoed Robert's sentiments about Europe being synonymous with Nyongo:

It's true. That's something I have come to experience. People will do everything possible to send their children to Europe, which is Nyongo. They go as far as selling their houses, their land, get indebted, just to send their child to Europe. Once your child is in Europe, you know you have made it because you now tend to depend solely on this person. And it causes a lot of stress on this person in Europe. Honestly, when you meet Africans and they tell you the stress they are going through in Europe, don't doubt them. They do everything to support family back home, and it is not like limited, it is extended family. You receive letters from everybody you've known in your life, including friends and every person, and they all want, want, want. I have a friend of mine in Holland, who for an asylum-seeker was sending back phenomenal amounts of money home through Western Union. She is taking care of her little sisters and her parents, but in Holland, she begs for where to live and does menial jobs to survive.

If in the past Nyongo or Msa was easily accessible to all witches wanting to place their zombies, increasingly such access is no longer a matter of course, especially for the ultimate centres of Nyongo situated in "Whiteman Kontri" with its compelling allure of modern conveniences (cf. Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002). Huge payments beyond simply having a human victim ("fowl" or "goat") to sacrifice are required for all sorts of things, ranging from passports to plane tickets, through medical doctors with special machines rumoured to transform a person from black to white, prophets with special abilities to empower weak passports, letters of invitation or admission, visas, work permits, green cards, services of middlemen and various types of placement fees. Even when the witches are able to come up with the payments required, there is little guarantee that things will sail through, as their zombie could always be denied a visa for one "capricious" reason or another. But the resolve to make it to or invest in Whiteman Kontri is phenomenal, and some use various indirections just to get their zombies there—the more the better. This means that unlike in the past, not every witch with someone to zombify qualifies to access Nyongo in a lucrative manner anymore, and resorting to indirections implies that not every zombie in Whiteman Kontri is going to be legal or to have worthwhile opportunities.

This speaks not only of a hierarchy of Nyongo and witches, but also of zombies, as some Nyongo and witches are more endowed with modern (in)conveniences than others, just as some zombies are more entitled than others to the consumer margins of Whiteman Kontri. Similarly, not every zombie is well placed to renegotiate relations with home or realize their Whiteman Kontri dream of success, comfort and freedom. Accounts of experiences in Whiteman Kontri, described in this paper, tell not only of changing attitudes to cultures of solidarity, interconnectedness and conviviality, as informed by the consumer status of zombies compared to the status of others back home, and to the status of fellow zombies in Whiteman Kontri. That Whiteman Kontri is seen and treated as Nyongo by Grassfielders and other Cameroonians out there is most evident from the accusatory language of victimhood (extreme anger, deep frustration, self-pity, regret and melancholy) that they employ to describe their subjection and ultra-exploitation by forces both in their home and host communities. In a world pregnant with rhetoric on universal human rights and global

citizenship, they cannot comprehend why everywhere the tendency remains firmly to deny them the basics in humanity and dignity. Every relationship they forge seems to dramatize their exploitation, leaving them drained and trapped like souls in Limbo.

In the Grassfields, children, relationships and knowledge of others are seen and treated primarily as long-term investments in selfless sociality. Sending a child to school or to town to learn a trade, forging links with intimate others, or simply getting acquainted, are perceived essentially as opportunities for future abundance to all those who participate directly or indirectly. Put crudely, investment in relationships is usually preceded by the question: how useful is this person likely to be for me and mine in the days, months and years ahead? What justifications do I (we) have to invest materially, emotionally and morally in this or that person? Any lack of a compelling answer to such a question entails a lukewarm attitude towards any overtures of recognition or request for assistance that might come from strangers, acquaintances, friends or even family. The golden mercantilist principle seems to be: nothing shall come from nothing; nothing ventured nothing gained; nothing in, nothing out. In other words, in a world of competing interests and limited resources any relationship or aspiration for recognition and belonging must prove itself materially to be taken seriously. Thus, for example, children are constantly reminded that “one person’s child is only in the womb”, and that they are sent to school (and into marriage, business, or whatever) not for themselves, but for their immediate and extended families, so that through their graduation into jobs and opportunities, others in the family would be able in turn to use them and their resources as a ladder of opportunity (cf. Nyamnjoh, 2002). Friends, acquaintances and strangers are scrutinized to establish in what way knowing them would limit depletion and enhance accumulation for the Grassfielders concerned (Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002). Personal success is seen to make sense only to the extent that individuals are able to transform such successes into a collective patrimony (Warnier, 1993; Rowlands 1994, 1995; Nyamnjoh, 2002), a situation that creates tense relations between achieving individual and expectant others, home or away.

In the past, when migration was limited and marrying out of one’s home village rare, it was commonplace to assume that witchcraft could not cross boundaries (epitomized by rivers). Nyongo was confined to intimate family circles, narrowly defined either as nuclear or extended. If witches were required to show proof of intimacy by removing the amulets (ammunition) of their potential victims, then they had to be family since family members were most likely the closest persons in the life of the individual. But with migration to plantations, cities and abroad, where individuals have had occasion to forge new intimacies with perfect strangers and at times to question the sincerity of kin, families have ceased to be the only intimate circles in the lives of diasporic Grassfielders. Sometimes friends and intimate strangers are far more precise on the nature and whereabouts of the amulets of the sons and daughters of rural families in the plantations, cities or abroad that they are most likely to succeed with them as witches than distant families in distant home villages. Flexible mobility has yielded multiple zones of intimacy, and by extension a less rigid notion of family. This is significant, since in the examples that follow, Grassfielders in the diaspora accuse not only their immediate and extended families of having sold them to Nyongo, but also friends, schoolmates and others with whom they had shared their lives and spaces during their years in Cameroon. The next four sections take a closer look at such predicaments, drawing on interviews and conversations with diasporic Grassfielders.

“Call Me Back” or “Kontri Fashion Go Catch You”

Bamenda Grassfielders abroad are under enormous pressure from kin back home to succeed, with kin seeking consumer citizenship through them, as consumer zombies planted abroad like pipelines into the refineries and reservoirs of modern conveniences. As friends or acquaintances of those abroad, they tolerate no excuses when they email, telephone, beep, SMS or write a letter claiming delayed remittances and consumer goodies, or even when they simply demand assistance with this or that urgent project back home. They are often very impatient and rushed in their approach, with a business-like demeanour that leaves little room for being pleasant or courteous. Most of the interviewees complained that communication from Cameroon was often “*droit au but*” and at times outrightly disrespectful. Martin, who holds a PhD in engineering, is comfortably employed and owns a British passport after over 20 years in England where he first went as a student in 1984, complained how Grassfielders back home “use accusations of non-observance of tradition” as a means of “extracting gifts without gratitude” from relations abroad, who are perceived to be “up on a plum tree but not sharing the black plums enough”. To him, a long list of demands by distant kin or elderly people one hardly knows is often preceded by threats of “*kontri fashion go catch you*” (tradition will indict you), as these people “believe themselves to be gendarmes of tradition, who should enforce the sharing of the spoils as ‘tradition’ dictates”. Hence his conclusion: “there are lots of traditions that are not really traditions but a means for some of the less privileged in our community to ‘beg’, without losing face, for resources to help them out of poverty”, and that as long as such chronic poverty exists, there will always be “gendarmes of tradition, who seek to ensure or enforce poverty alleviation traditions as a kind of culture tax on the haves by the have-nots to redistribute wealth”. He adds: “Those who pay the tax will always resent the tax and the tax collectors. As the general economic climate improves, I anticipate this tax will be abolished”. Martin’s sentiments are shared by a significant and growing number of diasporic Grassfielders, especially those (mostly in their mid-40s and younger) who have achieved a significant measure of personal success (through “their toil and sweat” even if with an initial push or pull by selfless parents and relatives or friends), are settled abroad, and return home sparingly for short visits mostly. Martin, like many others, has had a long time in exile, as the economic downturn and mismanagement by power without responsibility back home worsen, and family, friends and perfect strangers are increasingly aggressive burdens to their hard earned hard currencies. Compared to most zombies, however, Martin and others who are comfortable even by the standards of Whiteman Kontri can hardly be said to lack the means to assist people at home. In this regard, they could be accused of using tradition as an excuse to keep the fruits of personal success all to themselves, in the same way that they see those at home as using tradition to claim part of that success. For them, its hostility to their humanity and quest for inclusion notwithstanding, Whiteman Kontri increasingly represents an alternative (however unattractive) to the dangerous expectations of their home folks.

Others who are not necessarily as successful and established as Martin feel the same reluctance going home on holidays, even when they would very much love to spend time with friends and family back in Cameroon. The reason, as Etienne of Barcelona explains, is the excessive demands made on their meagre resources by people who do not care that much about them as human beings, although it must be admitted that in certain cases excessive demands are provoked by the conspicuous display of wealth, material

superiority and the air of achievement which “bushfallers”, “been tos” or diasporic Grassfielders emphasize when back home on brief visits. As the following example by Dervla Murphy of Hamburg-based George Charles Akuro shows, desperate to communicate “success”, Bamenda Grassfielders in Whiteman Kontri are all too eager to associate themselves with images of conspicuous consumption:

“Cameroon is *very bad*”, insisted George. “All these bush people, they don’t know how to live—they are backward stupid people! In Hamburg I have everything—big home, big car, deep freeze, fridge, cine-camera, television, stereo-system, swimming-pool for my kids. See! I show you!”

He drew a thick wallet of photographs from his briefcase and the children crowded eagerly around to marvel yet again at his achievements. There was George, leaning nonchalantly on the roof of a Mercedes by the open driving door—and George removing a silver-foil-wrapped dish from a face-level microwave oven—and George posing by an open refrigerator taller than himself and packed with colourful goodies—and so on. There were dozens of photographs, all of a professionally high standard and looking remarkably like advertisements for the objects illustrated. [. . .] (Murphy, 1989, p. 56)

Through such images of conspicuous consumption in the eyes of the “backward stupid people” in Cameroon, Bamenda Grassfielders abroad carry themselves like people who “have everything”, whose daily headaches are how to dispose of excess wealth and infinite abundance of consumer goodies. Back home on brief visits, they attract envy and admiration when they play up to appearances of riches through expensive outfits, fancy cars, loud western music, nightclubs and parties—in short, material abundance and consumer excellence. Not all self-consciously create this impression, but all are victims of wild expectations induced by such displays of effortless comfort in a context of entrenched penury:

When I went home for holidays, it was also a nightmare. Everybody visited me, many I did not even know. And the first thing most people said upon seeing me was: “*You bring me wetti from Whiteman Kontri?*” So most people did not come to say “Hi” and ask how I was doing. They came just because they were expecting something in return. Which means your presence is of no importance if there is nothing to get. And because of these high expectations from friends and relatives when one gets home, many students are scared of going home to spend some time with their families during holidays. So many people sit back home and say: “Children go to Europe, enjoy the good life there and don’t want to come back home”. These children don’t hate their home, they really do want to go home very often and spend some time with their old friends and relatives. But they are all frightened because they cannot fulfil all the expectations of those back home. So the question now is: who is to blame when the children stay away from home?

Some informants likened how they are treated back home to a farm where everyone imagines they can harvest without sowing. As Beatrice, a microbiology student at the University of Birmingham, England, put it, “once you get home, your friends come and

start examining your dresses saying: 'you go give me that this one no? I want na your phone. I want na that black shoe . . .' Most of them think you need to go back just with the dress you are putting on. 'After all, that sap them no dear for that side and wanna dey fine no?'" To her, few who ask are willing givers, and few give where they are not expecting to be rewarded abundantly with modern conveniences.

Critical sentiments about the presumptions and callous indifference by kin and friends at home to their predicaments in the diaspora are widespread among Grassfielders abroad, some of whom find it "funny that those who are not very close friends and relatives are the ones that make the most demands". While they believe in the cultures of solidarity, interconnectedness and conviviality of their home villages, they hate to be taken advantage of by opportunists or adventurers who are all too eager to benefit from tradition and relationships, but who refuse to invest in maintaining them. Those back home would have to make Robert of Copenhagen feel better than he does currently. He doubts that those who make impossible demands on him and others understand the extent to which "life abroad is different from what they think it is". He cites a colleague who "fell off his bike while making a sharp right turn on an icy road, and who was booked by the police for riding a bike without lights to distribute newspapers", all in an effort to make ends meet. This is hardship he finds difficult to reconcile with expectations of abundance by those who contact him from home:

Anyone who gets my email feels he can make demands authoritatively just because he knows me. Some ask that I look for application forms and send to them. I did in the beginning by posting such forms but few ever sent a word to thank me. Presently my response is that I am not a student anymore, so it is difficult to get information. Also I tell them I have no time, which has qualified me recently as an ingrate to some. Many ask that I provide them with a bank guarantee. Some ask me to invite them since I am married to a Dane so that they could become illegal immigrants when their visas expire. When I tell them that I cannot invite people based on my meagre income and a small apartment we live in, this becomes a problem. A cousin of mine told me to tell my wife to send them money because my wife is white. I told her that my wife is a student and that Europe on TV is different from what it is in reality. She took it as a personal grudge that I did not want to convey her message to a woman with limitless money.

In a region where the belief that "One person's child is only in the womb" is widespread (cf. Nyamnjoh, 2002), it is difficult to discriminate on the basis of a narrow idea of family, just as it is a challenge to curb the opportunism that comes with such a belief and the flexible notions of belonging it inspires. Examples of dangerous opportunism and sterile greed abound among Grassfielders, and were catalogued repeatedly in my various interviews and conversations. As Andrew, a Gaborone-based Grassfielder married to a Motswana, put it, a brief call or SMS would come from a relative through the cellphone announcing: "Call me back, I've got an urgent message for you". Worried and expecting the worst, Andrew would do everything to call, only to be told: "You've forgotten us! Send me this, send me that; without the slightest courtesy even to find out how I am doing, whether I am well or sick, free or behind bars as an illegal alien. Starving or barely getting by! They are simply not interested!" Similar experiences with calls from home were reported all over Europe, North America and Southern Africa.

To Julia of Basel:

Something which is very common, the phone rings and I pick up the phone: “Call me back, and they drop”. It seems as if you are with Swisscom, with all the facilities in the world to make infinite calls. They just believe that because you are in Europe it is cheaper, but it is not. It is more expensive, even when we use scratch call cards to reduce cost. Most of the time, what is most stressful when you hear “call me back”, you feel like something has happened. It is urgent. Maybe something serious has happened. So you are forced to call back. You ring directly from your house phone, which is more expensive, and they go on and on, to tell you all the problems, for ages. And you are like, can’t we just stop now, but no way.

To Robert of Copenhagen, this is sheer opportunism, ingratitude and lack of compassion:

People expect me to call, even as soon as they beep me. If I do not call, it becomes a problem. If they expect that I call today and I decide to call two days later they get angry as I hear the following words: “why you no bi call?” I reacted at one point by ending the call instantly after accusing this relative of ingratitude. I once got several beeps from the same number and decided to respond by an SMS and told whoever was beeping me that I was not a magician to guess who was behind the phone. It was a friend of mine who instantly replied, “I thought you would call back when I flashed you”. I later told him that people do not make calls home just because they receive a beep. People are becoming very impatient with the email system. They expect me to reply a mail as soon as they send one to me. No one is interested to hear my troubles. No one wants to hear I am unemployed; no one wants to hear I have lost my job. All they want is if they get benefits from me.

Most Grassfielders abroad shared the sentiment that it suffices for one to leave Cameroon for people back home to immediately upgrade and classify him or her as rich, and then to begin flooding them with impossible demands. When Gideon was a struggling student back in Cameroon, few cared, and his parents expected him to be grateful for every crumb he got as the adopted son of the family. Attention and privilege went to those children who “deserved more as true borns”. By some combination of talent and opportunity, however, he made his way to the Soviet Union, was educated to the level of PhD, qualified as a lawyer, married a Southern African medical doctor he studied with, and returned and settled with her in Pretoria at the end of apartheid. Unlike Martin of London, Gideon seems keen to help out, if only those at home could do more than play tricks on him. He shared with me letters of requests from home, where few of his privileged and pampered siblings have made headway in life. They call him repeatedly with long lists of demands, but are not keen on any line of independent existence he traces out for them. All they want is easy comfort, through his sweat and wallet as a successful businessman: “send me two taxis, build me a house, can we rent out to students the storey building you constructed with the idea of setting up a clinic? I’ve been introduced to someone in Douala who fixes travel papers for Europe effortlessly, but he wants a fee of two million francs. Please send this amount to me in a week, for I don’t want to miss the chance”. He once supplied his

sister with heavy duty industrial sewing machines, to start a business like his own back home, but she was more interested in moving in with her boyfriend at the time, and so preferred instead to ask him to send money for rents, for a wedding, for the baptism of the first, second child, and other favours. Recently his adopted father passed away and he received a call: "Your Papa has passed away. Call back and tell us the burial programme. We are waiting". He boarded the plane for home, accompanied by his wife, but at the end of 10 days among kin, "I was as poor as a church rat and had to borrow money to come back. But I had gone home with R15.000!" Jokingly, he told me he was contemplating changing his cellphone number and email address. Not that this would amount to much, given the ability of "google.com", "yahoo.com" and other search engines to minimize anonymity and privacy, and given the growing versatility of the dependent and the opportunistic with these technologies.

While completely cutting off ties by changing phone numbers and addresses is an option, not many want to go down that route, however pushed. Instead, most develop coping strategies aimed at lightening the burdens of expectations from home, such as appealing to the humanity of kin and friends, discouraging opportunism and adventurism, stressing reciprocity in relationships, attracting sympathy for their own personal predicaments, feigning poverty, and being frank about the hardships facing them as subjected and debased creatures at the margins of citizenship and humanity. A growing number feel that relatives and friends back home must understand that long celebrated solidarity and conviviality are at risk, should they continue to sharpen their consumer greed with callous indifference to the humanity of kin the way they do. There is little evidence that such strategies are working, but most felt the strategies would have to work in the interest of continued harmony and interconnectedness between those at home seeking the benefits of opportunities through relationships with kin desperately hunting for such opportunities in Whiteman Kontri.

Robert of Copenhagen practices many of these strategies:

In the beginning my reaction was very emotional but I realized that I was giving in too much. I started by subtly making them know that I was and am living a survivalist lifestyle by talking about bills, and elementary expenditures. But as the demands continued I told them direct that I would not do what they said. Most people took me for a liar.

I also react differently to different people. I usually respond to the cries of those who have helped me, when I am able. There are some that I would never respond to because their mails are always adventurous and reflect no love at all. I am very cunning to such people, trying to be elusive to their questions and demands. Those who believe that I do not lie are the patient ones who would always ask how I am and also are ready to offer some soothing words if I have a problem. Adventurers do not care about my welfare.

I used to reply emails as soon as I got them but I have learnt that if it is a demand I do not reply instantly anymore. I try to make things cool down so that people know I do not harvest money. I have also become provocative by asking people to buy expensive things and post to me. None has done this. This gives me a chance to talk with them on equal grounds.

There is little difference in exaggerated demands between dealing with family and dealing with friends or mere acquaintances. The level of ignorance or indifference about the wellbeing of those abroad is generally the same, even if some of the most mind-boggling demands come from those who are neither intimate friends nor close family, as the following three accounts show:

People are trying to make me feel we are very close but which is false in reality. When I just got here one girl wrote to me and said, “if you no send me money, you go only hear say ma corpse de for mortuary”. I wrote back and asked her about a love relationship she was trying to feign after she disqualified me some years ago. She replied and said I did not care about her anymore because I was in Europe and that when men get rich they forget poor people they have met in their lives.

While Pius was still in Cameroon, most of the girls in his school were not really interested in him. So before he left for Germany, he decided to go to the University of Buea and say farewell to his old school friends. Those same girls who were not interested in him were so friendly. Some even offered him their room in case he will like to spend the night in Buea. That was really great. Pius used the advantage and enjoyed the hospitality and left the university with a hand full of email addresses and telephone numbers. Even his small friend—Lady D—who was still in secondary school in Form 4, and with whom he used to communicate just as a friend, assumed, all of a sudden, that Pius is her boyfriend. The problem is that when you are nice to the ladies back home they tend to take it for something else. So Pius was not ready for that and stopped contact with Lady D. When you are in Europe all the girls back home want to identify with you. It is not just Lady D. Many other girls keep pestering Pius with emails, sending their cell numbers and expecting calls, gifts, money, etcetera. That’s just the wonders of Europe.

I receive numerous emails and letters from girls and others back home, who either want money or are preaching love sermons. But there is this one incident, which is really funny. Sometimes back I received a letter from Pa Coco who claimed to be a neighbour of ours in Bamenda. He really described himself and his house so that I could make him out. But while I could figure out the house, I couldn’t make out who Pa Coco was. Pa Coco wanted me to lend him FCFA 4 million. He claimed he had a piece of land, which he could use as collateral security, and that it was a matter of life and death. A matter of life and death indeed! If the piece of land was really worth that much, why could he not sell it and use the money to settle the matter of life and death?

It is not often that beggars, askers or seekers are competent givers, nor are they trusting and trustworthy. Money and consumer items meant for several back home often end up attending to the appetites of the individuals through whom they are channelled who, on the expectation chain, feel more entitled than everyone else. Interviewees felt terribly frustrated and impotent at not being able to do things directly for particular people at home, without having to pass through middlemen and women who, like boa constrictors, assumed the status of giant compressors. Somehow, the tendency is to assume that what is earned abroad comes easy and can thus be requested and disposed of as one pleases, or that

those abroad are zombies meant to toil without ceasing, just as they can be appropriated with impunity by whoever is smart enough to do so. Zombies are beneath humanity, to be used as doormats, pillows or toilet paper, and it is a contradiction in terms to treat them as if they were humans. This means that some migrants are likely to receive accusations (if these eventually filter through to them) of being rich, selfish and dead to the relationships that made them, when in fact they are doing their level best to redistribute and maintain solidarities with those who truly matter to them. Slave drivers (opportunists and adventurers) are there to ensure that the efforts of zombies shall not trickle down to those who have valued them beyond zombiehood, so that the world shall never be restructured to accommodate zombie expectations of humanity and dignity.

Again, Robert of Copenhagen offers an interesting illustration:

As concerns demands from home, I have come to realize what it means to be at a receiving end of accusation stemming from people's belief that the rich are selfish. I have come to see why those we considered rich in the family were nonchalant to family members' frustrated anger. I was socialized from youth to think those we considered rich were selfish and greedy. Now is my turn; people believe I am selfish and greedy and it hurts, for I know I am not rich. I am surviving just like any young man would when pushed to extremes, but the people have no ears for such explanations. When I tell people I am supporting my wife since she has no income for now, their reaction is usually that why should I support a white woman? They are rich and need not be supported by an African. I then bring in reality: the very woman you do not wish that I support made me to live with her and I did not pay rents for two years, the money I earned all those years was sent to you. They become silent.

A consequence of not bending over backwards enough to grace the consumer whims and caprices of opportunistic and adventurous folks back home is that, as Robert further tells us, people turn their backs on you, thereby leaving you vulnerable to the imagined or real curses of "kontri fashion". Your only hope, at the end of the day, is that "kontri fashion" would be able to differentiate between blasphemy, hypocrisy and opportunism on the one hand, and a genuine commitment to collective interests informed by interconnectedness, interdependency and conviviality:

I have lost the feelings I had back home partly because of the alienation I feel here and secondly because the infantile dreams I had about Europe were a fantasy. Additionally, the many demands have made me think people are just adventurous and have hardened my heart. I think I have become a little conservative and accumulative because of the insecurity I feel. I want to have some money as security if I should return home some day. I am not very willing to share this money I earn through hard labour. I have lost good relations with some friends and relatives by being abroad. Many people do not write to me anymore. I have few beeps nowadays. Only few still trust me. I feel comfortable.

Robert might "feel comfortable" with fewer people writing or beeping him with catalogues of wild requests, but he does not quite feel at home in Denmark either. In a recent email to me announcing the birth of his baby boy, he revealed his plan to leave Denmark: "I presently work 12½ hours each weekday because I want to accumulate money

and leave this place for good”. To capture his situation best, “work” should be substituted with “slave away as a cleaner”. If he does eventually return home, it shall not be a home with which he is comfortable.

Nyongo Business and Western Union

Cameroonians back home are said to cook up impossible businesses or projects in their heads, with no idea whatsoever where the money is going to come from. Then they go around pestering relatives and friends abroad to provide them with fabulous, mind-boggling sums of money. And since they all believe in keeping up consumer appearances, everybody in Whiteman Kontri is considered rich enough to be approached as a source of resources. The appearance on the scene in the 1990s of instant electronic money transfer facilitators such as Western Union has made otherwise ordinary folks drunk with expectations of money. Western Union has rapidly become a status symbol for the poor and most of those without bank accounts (the place to be seen receiving money), an aspiration and a dream, as those associated with it either as senders or receivers are highly regarded, admired and envied by others. University girls with multiple connections to “boyfriends” and “fiancés” abroad have tended to measure achievement and status through the corridors of Western Union agencies, and to display the money they collect in such provocative ways that only make their local male counterparts more determined to migrate to Whiteman Kontri as well. I was told by several informants of how they would receive strange calls from people back home with one question only: “What is the number?”, referring to the Western Union transaction code, as a timely reminder for them to effect some badly needed transfers.

This is how Julia of Basel put it:

At times, if somebody manages to call and ask you to call back and you do, they pick up a pen and say: “Give me the number”. And you say: “What number?” And they say “Western Union”. It is always money. It’s so mad, and you think, why can they not just call me to find out how are the kids? Are you well? I just called to find out if everything is okay. No, it is always about money, or there is a problem.

To Robert of Copenhagen, despite such a hassle, few back home are ready to share with one another, to give others their due. It is all an eternal cycle of greedy opportunism, even among family members who ought to care better for kinship solidarity:

No one wants to lose, no one wants another to benefit from whatever financial assistance received. I have even realized that if you have two friends living in the same room and you decide to send money only to one of them, he would have little or no intentions to share with the other friend. I once sent money home and specified how it should be distributed among family members. The person through whom I sent the money decided he would not give one of the family members the right amount because he thought it was too much. This got to me within days and I called back to warn that all receive what was specified. The funny thing is that the person through whom I had sent the money had FCFA 115.000 and the one he intended to cheat had FCFA 7.000. In another case I had the intention of sending money for a frustrated uncle who dropped out of university in the early ‘90s to help him make a

fresh start in life. I consulted the wealthiest man in the family, thinking that he could support by adding some money to what I intended to send. I was shocked. The wealthy man requested that I send the money to him so that he could do better business with it and not to his suffering younger brother. His pretext was that the family was not united. I boiled in the head and decided not to send the money.

Another informant, Godwin, a graduate and minicab driver in Manchester, recounted how he once joked with an uncle, by including a test question—"Name?"—for which the answer was "Nyong'o", hoping that the uncle's demands would dry up thereafter, but it did not work. Most Grassfielders I talked to shared the following assessment by Robert of Copenhagen:

Most believe I have suddenly become rich and can do anything I want, so they come up with investment proposals. When I ask how much they are prepared to put down as their part of the investment they become silent and angry. Some make demands by talking about their problems. Such problems are presented as very demanding: some talk about how much they have spent on a particular project or treatment of disease; others talk of how much they would spend, others tell me how much is left to complete a project. All of these are to make sure I make a contribution to their project. Some people make demands by telling me what they have done to me in the past so that I feel guilty if I do not help them at that particular time.

According to Lewis, a Hamburg-based student who has repeatedly received requests to send home secondhand Mercedes, BMWs, Pajeros and all sorts of fancy cars, "When you don't, you are cursed until you gradually fade away with guilt, to the point where you are even afraid to answer your own phone, read your email and warm up to news of someone who has just returned from home with letters for you. You are incapable of thinking good thoughts about home". Commenting on a friend who seems a victim of eternal demands for gifts and assistance from friends and kin who have never reciprocated his generosity, Walters, another Germany-based student lamented:

Ever since Peter came to Europe friends and relatives keep writing, asking for money and presents. But none of them have ever sent him a grain of groundnuts or even gari. These things are common everywhere at home. But no, gifts must always move from Europe to Africa and not from Africa to Europe. What a disaster! When others are happy to receive mails from home, it's the opposite with him because from the sender of some mails he can already tell if it is one of those terrorists trying to harass him with their numerous demands.

To Mike, a medical student in Heidelberg, "What I find funny is that when you are abroad, people do remember you only when they are in trouble. And there are these words they always use: 'you are my last hope'". This note of desperation might suggest a considered and esteemed relationship of confidence and trust, but the fact that Mike laughed dismissively means he sees it more like a ploy by opportunistic people back home to defraud them abroad.

In this regard, the case of Maxwell, a Johannesburg-based accountant married to a South African woman, is quite illustrative. His half brother was sending strings of emails demanding money for this or that project. Maxwell remained adamant to his brother's pleas and the wife decided to send some money without the husband's knowledge. An email was never sent to acknowledge receipt, let alone show gratitude. After a while, an email came through with similar demands, and with a short sentence: "I received the FCFA 20.000 your wife sent". This really put Maxwell off, who swore never to send a franc. In pursuit of his greed, the half brother persuaded another cousin of theirs to create an email address with the latter's names, which the half brother was to have access to. Posing as this well-liked cousin, the half brother sent a mail to Maxwell asking for assistance. The response was prompt. But when these mails became regular, Maxwell was suspicious, especially as the cousin was not someone who wrote regularly. Maxwell decided to call the cousin and find out, only to realize that this cousin had never written a single mail, and that he was not even familiar with the computer and Internet technology. The cheating half brother, unaware that he had been found out, called and said: "Call me back for urgent business". Maxwell was curious, and called only to be told: "Affair de for American Embassy for get visa for USA and the fee na only 3 million. Send me the money so that I don't miss this opportunity. When I get to the USA I will work and settle you". Maxwell ignored him, but he has not given up.

Some of the most persistent requests for more modern conveniences and financial assistance to pursue consumer ambitions are from former schoolmates, friends and acquaintances back home, who employ the Internet, cellphone or any other technology to reach out to those abroad with infinite demands and expectations. Girls are said to employ such technologies to "beg for money" from "boyfriends" abroad. According to Robert of Copenhagen, "girls have the tendency to send the same email to as many boys as they know, creating new boyfriends as well as feigning consolidation of old faded relationships", sometimes dramatizing the sense of urgency by "feigning illness" and asking friends to send mails on their behalf. As the following case related to me by a medical student in Germany illustrates, it is not only girls who play the opportunism game with new technologies:

Pius left Cameroon for Germany to pursue university studies. Just like all other "Bushfallers", he decided to write to all his old friends back at home. A few of them replied, but not Elias or Anthony. Surprisingly, a year later Pius received a letter from Elias, who had used his university tuition fees to buy himself a pair of shoes and what have you. And now, guess who was to substitute? Pius of course! Pius being so kind sent him 50 deutschmarks. Elias was very happy, and sent an email thanking Pius and that was it. No more mails. Three months later came another email from Elias who still had problems paying his fees. But this time he was a little bit tactful, so he asked Pius to loan him FCFA 50.000. But unfortunately for him, Pius did not fulfil his demands and that was it. Till today, no more mails.

A year later, Pius received mail from Anthony, whose girlfriend was pregnant and he needed "the magic sum" of FCFA 50.000 for an abortion. And again Pius was his last hope. Pius already knew all these tricks and did not respond positively to that. Anthony was very angry that Pius did not care, and has since never written to him again.

There are many other people who have been pestering Pius. One will ask for a laptop, for he needs it to do his “projects” at the university. Where will Pius get such a thing to send home when he cannot afford one for himself? Another will ask him to send him “about” three or four old photocopy machines, so that he can start a small business of his own [*“Massa I know say that thing them no dear for that side no? So that one na just small thing for you no?”*, said one of them]. Some even ask him to make a bank statement for them. They don’t even think about his own life, how he meets up with his demands, what he earns at the end of the month. All the greedy people do think is just how to squeeze money out of him

Whether by family, schoolmates or others, investments back home by diasporic Grassfielders are often money down the drain. Few expect them, and indeed, most would find it ludicrous or an irritation, for their diasporic kin or friends to come asking for accounts or seeking to know what dividends the investments have yielded. Sometimes even the investment capital is swallowed or simply diverted. This was an issue of great frustration and widespread complaint amongst those I interviewed, as nearly everyone could point to some kin or friend back home who had embezzled or misappropriated investments and funds sent home for one project or other. Most interviewees shared the following complaint by Robert of Copenhagen:

I do not know if you have some experiences of unaccountability for any business you have done home under the responsibility of a family member. People believe that when you are abroad and do any investment you do not need to benefit from such investments, which are seen as something you just do for fun and to the benefit of whoever is responsible. They forget that you work hard for any little thing to get to them. It is close to two years since I sent two cars home. I went home last year and saw only one of them. I asked no questions. But do not be surprised to hear that I have never got any account of these cars, which if I were not married here, they should have been my own backbone if I had returned as soon as I finished my studies. No one accounts for it. I stay quiet and it has sent a discouraging signal to me. I am willing to do investment, so that if I go home, I do not need to go along with money. But there is no one to trust because people have a very thwarted mentality as to what it means to invest from abroad.

The Cellphone

Cellphones are among the most coveted gifts, and every person interviewed expressed both amazement and frustration with relatives, friends and acquaintances competing to see who could extract the best cellphone from whom in Whiteman Kontri. I was related stories of family members or girlfriends who would claim their cellphones were either missing, stolen or bad, merely as a ploy to be sent new and latest models of popular and elite brands—the smaller the better. Some shared letters with me, containing requests for cellphones, which in certain cases were by people hardly in a position to pay for airtime units. While they may be other reasons for owning a cellphone and for their surging popularity in the Grassfields and among Cameroonians as a whole, one important reason is to be able to track down and hold zombies accountable for the money they earn and the

material goods they accumulate in Whiteman Kontri. Being largely undocumented, few Cameroonian zombies in Whiteman Kontri have permanent or fixed addresses, and can best be reached through the cellphone, by email or via fellow zombies. Few of their contacts at home have physical or postal addresses either. In both cases, the cellphone and Internet are Godsend, though for pestered zombies it sometimes looks like Devil-sent. As new technology, the cellphone, like the Internet, seems to have offered Nyongko a golden opportunity and opportunism to globalize itself and its system of accountability, making it increasingly difficult for recalcitrant zombies to live in peace, out of touch or out of hand, even when clearly out of sight. Here are some selected accounts:

Most ask for mobile phones and money. No one tells me what he intends to do with the money. In short, they just want money for the sake of it (according to me). I get surprised when a university student who is unable to buy books or who keeps going for weekends from one relative to the other in order to get money for housing and food should be requesting a mobile phone. I asked a cousin whose parents find it difficult to pay his fees as to why he should be so obsessed with having a mobile phone while he does not have enough to eat. He said he has a lot of friends in Europe and USA who prefer to communicate with him through the phone. I told him frankly that he did not need a phone, and that if he desperately needed a phone, one of his friends abroad should help him get one. He took me for an ingrate and wrote a short mail to me, which ended, “who knows tomorrow?”

Julia of Basel shared with me a letter sent by an apparently jealous husband who could not stand the fact that his wife’s cellphone was a superior brand to his. First, Julia had hesitated sending the wife a cellphone, doubting how with her modest means the wife could afford to maintain it. But the woman had insisted that the cellphone was her gift of choice, as Julia had asked her to name a gift. Notice the bolded “Love” that Julia and her “handsome husband” and “beautiful mother” are supposed to have for “my family”, and the implied risk of being branded “Loveless” and “ugly” in case of failure to comply with the request. Not convinced Mathias had any real intentions of paying her back, given his rather woolly promise, Julia ignored his request, to the approval of her husband who insists on accountability and transparency. Julia had the advantage of being able to assess Mathias’s letter and request in comparison with many others sent her from Cameroon. The letter read:

Dear Julia,

It’s my pleasure to put before you my few words of greetings of which I hope it will meet you in good condition of health. How are you and the family? I am confidence that everything is moving on well.

I know you will be surprised to read from me. It is because of the **Love** you have for my family. I want to appreciate the big parcel you sent to my wife. The phone is such a strong mark that I have never seen in Cameroon.

May the Lord almighty continue to bless you richly, so that more things will come to us through you. You are such a nice lady. How I wish you could also send me a strong phone of a different mark from my wife’s own and then tell me how much I

will pay. I will then send you the money through any person who will be coming over there. The phone I have, got bad. Since then I have not been able to see a better one. If that favour can be given me, then send it through the bearer. We are all doing fine in health exception of my mother in law who is always on and off. Extend my sincere greeting to your handsome husband and your beautiful mother. When is she coming back to Cameroon? We are actually missing you people.

While hoping to hear from you very soon,

Accept my regards
Mathias

Tensions over cellphones between husbands and wives in Cameroon are in certain cases worsened by the fact that children, relations and acquaintances abroad have tended to invest more in women than in men back home. Grassfield youth studying or working abroad are more likely to invite their mothers to visit than they are their fathers. For one thing, mothers are more amenable to lightening the burdens of zombiehood by keeping the house, cooking, babysitting and generally employing themselves creatively round the clock in the interest of their sons and daughters slaving away. They are least likely to be impatient or bored, and in some cases where "home village" conjures images of infinite squabbles with husbands, co-wives and others, they are not in a hurry to return. Mothers therefore are more likely than fathers to be zombified in turn by zombified sons and daughters abroad.

As our earlier study on perceptions of Whiteman Kontri among Cameroonian youth demonstrated (Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002), this remark by Eric, an undocumented migrant in Rotterdam, is significant: "One cannot blame those guys back home for demanding too much. It's obvious that until somebody steps into Europe or America, they don't realize that life here is not a bed of roses as we used to think while at home", where visiting whites, returning migrants and consumer television do little to give a nuanced or less flashy image of Europe as an Eldorado. Those who tell the truth about Europe are least likely to be taken seriously by kin and friends seeking paradise: "When you try to discourage them that life here as an asylum-seeker is very difficult, they will say: 'if the life no be fine you no for still dey for that side' or 'you don go di enjoy you no want make me too I come enjoy' or 'you don go taste the life e sweet and you no want make we taste 'em too'". If lessons are learnt about what Whiteman Kontri truly is, this usually comes too late: "A friend of mine who was running a good business in Cameroon decided to sell all his stocks and come to Germany to seek asylum. One month after he arrived, he told me he has made the greatest error in his life. 'I be dey Cameroon like king and since I come for this kontri, I di live na like some slave.'" It must however be emphasized, as those I interviewed did, that although widespread, not everyone back home embraces the consumer bandwagon with extravagant fantasies and callous indifference. There are kin and friends who are measured in their demands and who care about the welfare of those in Whiteman Kontri. They may be in the minority, but they are most appreciated by the zombies, as the following examples illustrate:

What is also really funny is that those who demand too much are those who were not very close to Pius while he was back home. Instead those very close to him, his very

good friends and close family members, always write asking about his studies, health financial problems, etcetera. Those are the people you do your best to help in what ever way you can, either in the form of a gift or financially. Even when such people need something from him they will say, "I know it's not easy on you, but I have this or that problem. Please if there is a way you can help me, I'll be grateful". So how will he not help such people who care about him?

White Passports to Nyongo

If easy material comfort is possible only with and through Nyongo, more and more Bamenda Grassfielders are doing everything to place their zombies in Whiteman Kontri. This includes forging mercantilist relationships with whites, visible and invisible. Whites who venture into the Bamenda Grassfields and/or cultivate relationships with Grassfielders soon realize what an astronomical price they have to pay to be recognized and accepted as acquaintances, collaborators, friends, loved ones, husbands or wives by Grassfielders, as they are made to battle with unfathomable craving for and expectations of fulfilment of the wildest consumer fantasies. One of the very first questions a white visitor is asked is about visa formalities and what he or she could do to facilitate legal or illegal passages to Whiteman Kontri, about which fantasies are more readily available and credible than reality. Some proudly declare that they would rather be prisoners in Whiteman Kontri than "free" in their materially impoverished and grossly mismanaged home country (cf. Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002). Whites are also immediately confronted with a deeply materialistic foundation of love and relationships, which to them is often a culture shock, coming as they do from a background of assumptions that money and material riches must not stand in the way of true love.

As Monica, a young Swiss student who recently visited Bamenda, puts it:

If friendship is too closely linked to money, then it is not friendship. Friendship is only true when no personal interests of any kind are involved. So if you only make friends with somebody because you can profit from him or her, then you exploit him or her; and we feel very hurt if this happens. The problem gets more complicated when you go to Africa, where you will meet many people with less money or opportunity than you and moreover they don't hesitate to ask you for money.

In the course of her stay in Bamenda, Monica had the culture shock not only of being made to think about money in a very conscious sort of way, but also of being asked for money or expected to show friendship by people she hardly knew. As she confessed, "money is quite absent" in her everyday life at home, and she usually is "never asked for money in this direct way by a friend and even less by somebody you don't know well". But in Bamenda, she remarked that as soon as she had "exchanged names and had talked once" with someone, that seemed reason enough for them to ask her for money or to behave as if "we were best friends, which was totally against my feelings". Where she comes from:

It takes very long before we call somebody a friend in my culture. So, having been asked so openly for money by half strangers, made me feel strange. On my front

people read "MONEY". Some people didn't see me as a person but covered my white body with their dreams of a better life somewhere else, so that I felt like an object. I've had this feeling in Indonesia as well. And black people in Switzerland must have the same feeling sometimes and even worse because people don't look up to them—as some did too much to me, but rather down on them. On the other hand, it makes you feel even worse being invited as a "rich person" by a "poor person", people in Cameroon are very hospitable and it should be a lesson for us.

Monica came to know and work closely with a group of high school students with an interest in theatre and film production. They became her friends, and she was granted membership and the status of "sister" of their association. As they were more than helpful to her, "I gave them a token as a sign of support at the end of my stay", promising "to try to find some support for them in Switzerland", although making it quite clear that this was going to be difficult. "One day when I was back, the president of the group called me, they needed money very badly and urgently". This request, together with other encounters in Cameroon, have brought out her "my money-feelings", much more than has her middle class family "where you don't talk about money":

As we say in German "we don't swim in money" but we have enough to live a generous life. My father receives, like every Swiss household about two charity letters, begging for money, per week! And he gives quite some money to various NGOs in Switzerland, Eastern Europe, Africa, South America and handicapped organizations. Anyway, when I received this call from my friends, I was on the one side very happy that they had called. On the other hand they told me: they needed FCFA 300.000 to produce a film. God! That's a lot!

My sister and I decided to invest in their project and so far we have sent half the money and after we will have seen the outcome, the second half. I had a copy of the script and I knew the people who they were going to work with and both my sister and me are fascinated by their own initiative, though it meant more than a month's salary for me. After they had received the money, I didn't hear anything anymore for a long time, didn't even receive an email. The next call that I got was that they needed the second half in order to bribe the person who should edit their film. Our answer was no. We gave our word that we are going to send the amount after we will have seen the film; so adults from Bamenda shall pay the amount and we guarantee to pay it back. We will see what is going to happen next.

Four months after Monica's misgivings, her Bamenda friends delivered "a wonderful movie—*Rivers to Cross*—in VCD by TNT courier". "Very impressed with the quality of acting, picture and sound", she and her sister immediately honoured their pledge by sending the second half of the money, "knowing that we hadn't trusted in vain". The friends have since been emailing and telephoning to ask for even more money for their second film, and for other things. But Monica and her sister are categorical that they have no more money to offer, much as they would like to stay in touch and visit Bamenda now and again. In a recent email to Monica, a pastor she knew in Bamenda warned: "your young friends may be taking advantage of your generosity".

To Trina, another Swiss student who recently visited Bamenda as part of her African Studies programme as well, the idea of Europe or Whiteman Kontri as “paradise” “is not so easy to internalize, especially for a European like me”:

I think a lot of different levels should be taken into consideration. Perhaps at the beginning you may ask: What is the definition of paradise? What comprises this term or concept? My view: I am a European. I grew up in Switzerland. I am socialized here and until recently, I spent the most part of my life in Switzerland. Sometimes I like Switzerland very much, especially the landscape. In these moments I could love everything, I feel at home, because my family and a lot of my friends are living here. I have the possibility to study at university and of course my parents—my father is professor at university and my mother is a Spanish teacher—earn enough money to support me in my studies. I am also working one and a half days per week to have the possibility to pay my rents for the apartment, which I share with one of my friends. These, together with peace, wealth, enough food and water, etcetera, all belong to my personal idea of Paradise. But on other days I can be very furious about my small-minded and conservative country, and I am ashamed of everything and everybody. Then Switzerland, Europe, isn't a paradise. Paradise then is somewhere else, far, far away. These are some reflections.

In Cameroon, I made this experience often that a lot of people thought Europe is comparable with paradise. For me these discussions often weren't easy. I preferred to speak about that with people who I already knew better, for example, my host-family, because to discuss this kind of thing you need time, you can't touch all aspects of that during one evening. I know how hard it can be for African people to gain a foothold in Europe—difficult to get a right of residence, to get a job for example. It wasn't easy to explain these Swiss realities to people living in Africa: because I was ashamed to tell them the “truth” (I did it), especially to people who had welcomed me to their country in so friendly a manner; and because a lot of Cameroonians didn't want to hear how things are “really” in Switzerland.

What is obvious from both experiences is that perceptions of whites and Whiteman Kontri are shaped more by stereotypes, fantasies and utopia than by the reality of whites as human beings seeking comfort in contexts of uncertainties even for the apparently well placed (Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002). Like Trina, Monica feels that the future lies in a greater intercultural understanding and commitment to a common humanity without the blinkers that come with stereotypes and misrepresentations. Such understanding should make possible flexible citizenship mediated by the experience and negotiation of difference that zombies have to offer. But for this to be feasible, the material predicaments of those at the margins of personal success must be addressed in a concerted manner.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that flexible mobility and advances in information and communication technologies have transformed understanding of family, relationships, intimacy and a certain form of witchcraft—Nyongo—among Bamenda Grasssfielders at

home and in Whiteman Kontri. Subscribing to the philosophy that “a child is one person’s only in the womb” (Nyamnjuh, 2002), individuals and communities from the Bamenda region use Nyongo to outgrow bounded ideas of home, and also to domesticate the opportunities that come with flexible mobility and new dimensions of being and belonging. With modern technologies such as the plane, television, Internet and cellphone, flexible notions of witchcraft have been globalized as families and communities sacrifice sons and daughters to forage for opportunities in Whiteman Kontri, while at the same time multiplying opportunities for accountability and, quite paradoxically, opportunism as well. Such accessibility, flexible mobility and flexible witchcraft discourses have also engendered flexible ideas of relationships of intimacy. In its modern form, witchcraft crosses boundaries and stretches the borders of intimacy with opportunities and opportunism informed by consumerism, especially as experienced at the margins of belonging and success. With these possibilities, home appears less confined by borders, as bounded ideas of being and belonging are tinkered with constantly by desperate zombies in tune with the infinite possibilities of Nyongo technologies.

Although the potential to globalize Nyongo and its rewards have increased, access to lucrative locations for accumulation through Nyongo actually appears to diminish with rigid policing of zombies seeking belonging beyond the traditional womb of geography, race, ethnicity and family. While itself not an unproblematic alternative to the tensions and expectations of home as circumscribed by geography, culture, race and ethnicity, Whiteman Kontri (thanks to the experiences of its zombies) has at least evidenced that the answer to tensions is neither in simply substituting one womb for another, but rather in seeking to deliver the child to the world where dynamic relationships with others should be the prime indicator of belonging and citizenship. Home in this sense becomes “a radically deterritorialized” reality that is possible only through relationships that mitigate the feeling of discomfort, making one feel at home even when not at home in any conventional sense (Englund, 2004, pp. 296–306).

Unfortunately however, the womb of Whiteman Kontri has taught zombies the importance of dreaming with their feet firmly on the ground, thereby entrusting them with the mission of puncturing the dreams of potential zombies with little direct personal experience of this imagined utopia. Few actually are made to feel at home away from home in Whiteman Kontri, where good and bad, pleasure and pain, utopia and dystopia are all intertwined. The extent to which the stark reality of ultra-exploitation and devaluation are likely to be dissuasive is doubtful, especially as few zombies are ready to share their experiences of fierce exclusion, and even fewer are ready to believe them. No degree of dehumanization seems compelling enough to deter Grassfielders seeking a foothold in Whiteman Kontri (Nyamnjuh & Page, 2002), and few have a choice of permanently severing links with the home village, notwithstanding their tense relations with relatives and friends out there. Increasingly, not every witch with someone to zombify qualifies to do so in a lucrative manner anymore, and resorting to indirections entails that not every zombie in Whiteman Kontri is going to be legal, to have worthwhile opportunities, or to be minimally tolerated, let alone offered the opportunity to feel at home.

This speaks not only of a hierarchy of Nyongo and witches, but also of zombies, as some Nyongo and witches are more endowed with modern opportunities and opportunism than others, just as some zombies are more entitled than others to the consumer margins of Whiteman Kontri. These hierarchies demonstrate the changing attitudes to cultures

of solidarity, interconnectedness and conviviality, as informed by the consumer status of zombies compared among themselves and to the status of others in their home villages. The accusatory language of victimhood employed by zombies to describe their subjection and ultra-exploitation by forces at home and in the host countries is evidence that, to them, home is neither simply to be found “at home” or “away from home”.

While severing ties with home is an option, few want to take it seriously even as a last resort, especially given the reluctance of wombs to nurture the children of others. Instead, most develop coping strategies aimed at lightening the burdens of expectations from the bounded home, such as appealing to the humanity of kin and friends, discouraging opportunism and adventurism, stressing reciprocity in relationships, attracting sympathy for their own personal predicaments, feigning poverty, and being frank about the hardships facing them as subjected and debased creatures at the margins of citizenship and humanity. A growing number feel that relatives and friends in home villages must understand that long celebrated solidarity and conviviality are at risk in the face of sharpened consumer greed and callous indifference. All would welcome a more open, less overbearing host community where they can feel at home without being confined by home. There is little evidence that such strategies are working, but who feels at home, and where, is increasingly dependent on how individuals and communities are able to negotiate between expectations and opportunities, autonomy and subjection, rootedness and mobility.

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