

Life is a *njangi*: A life history of social solidarity, trust and reciprocal obligations in the Cameroon Grassfields

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A child is one person's only in the womb

My name is John Tawoh. I was born into the family of Papa Joe and Mama Maurean in the Wum area, a village in the Menchum Division of the North West Region of Cameroon, often referred to as the Cameroon Grassfields. In this region of the country inclusive relationships are most highly emphasised, with famous sayings such as: “*A child is one person's only in the womb,*” “*One hand cannot tie a bundle,*” “*You need a hand to wash another,*” “*A goat eats where it is tethered,*” “*When your brother is up a fruit tree, you will eat the juiciest fruit,*” and “*I am my brother's keeper*”. It is a region where conviviality and interdependency, demonstrated through wealth in people is prioritised over wealth in things.



Cameroon Grassfields

Being poor rural farmers, my parents subscribed to the philosophy of wealth in people, hence bearing many children was considered an investment in the future, in the hope that one or two or three of their many children might succeed in a world where no condition is permanent. This perhaps explains why my father and mother gave birth to 10 children – 4 males and 6 females, all of who are still alive. This is unusual because in the Cameroon Grassfields life expectancy is very low (many children die at birth) and even if they do grow to adulthood many die from several illnesses recurrent in the area. The greatest challenge was the widespread lack of access to healthcare resulting in the tendency to consult diviners and traditional healers.

With no formal education and employment, my parents resorted (or rather, followed in the family tradition of) subsistence and cash crop farming to keep life afloat. As farmers, cash crops were the main means of survival, coffee being the preferred. Counting only a few hectares, my father's coffee farm was unable to produce more than two bags of

coffee a year. This poor harvest increased his financial difficulties, forcing him to seek an alternative income generating activity to be able to provide for his family. At the end he resorted to trading in bush meat between neighbouring villages, given the increased demand for bush meat at the time. My mother supported my father by cultivating cocoyams, beans, maize, vegetables, and other foodstuff to feed the family. Despite his poor financial situation or maybe because of it, my father worked hard to provide basic primary education to nine of us; my elder sister decided, or was rather made to stay home to babysit her younger siblings, myself included. My elder sister's actions and words have remained implanted in my memory. She once told me:

“My brother... bear in mind that some day you will also support my child to study like you... since Papa did not enrol me into school. But I carried all of you on my back... fed you... please cause my child to read and write.”

I attended primary school in the Catholic School Wum, graduating in 1982. Despite performing well at the Government Common Entrance Examinations into colleges, I was certain that secondary education was not meant for the poor and wretched of the earth like me. While, most of my classmates went to college, others like me went to the coastal towns of the country like Tiko and Buea to work in the banana, rubber, cocoa, coffee and tea plantations. I was frequently troubled by my predicament, especially my inability to afford education and often thought to myself, *“Had it been I was born in a family that has the financial resources to pay fees, I would have been a college boy.”* I was smart and had the intelligence it takes to succeed in college but I didn't have the financial assistance to pay my way through college. Though these feelings dampened my spirit, I never blamed my parents for my predicament precisely because they showed enormous love to us and continuously prayed that God keep us healthy. I eventually did go to college because of the hand of solidarity extended by others, solidarity that can never remind me enough of the saying that *“a child is one person's only in the womb”* - meaning that while an unborn child can be claimed by its parents as theirs, after birth s/he becomes the child of the community. This further emphasises conviviality and interdependency, as central towards constituting personhood.

Life as njangi

A child is firewood at old age is another saying implying that parents expect their children to care for them in old age, keeping them warm with their love and attention. There is a strong belief that children must stay alive and succeed enough to give their parents a befitting burial, especially given the weakening of institutions and structures which both guarantee and provide social security, hence the emphasis on cultivating conviviality and interdependency as insurance. The cruel ironies of life often turn the tables such that parents find themselves burying their own children. This illustrates the idea of *“life as njangi”* which contracts children and their parents in relationships of delayed/generalised reciprocity. Moreover, personhood is defined as a social and collective effort, with individuals existing through relationships of inclusivity rather than the narrow, anti-social confines of purely biological relations. Elderly people in the community can therefore, discipline, feed, show love, and request for help from *any* child and the child is obliged to assist and show love to all elderly people, considering them as

their parents, thus providing a framework for intergenerational continuity.

My parents knew that they had to contribute to my upbringing so that at old age I would reciprocate. Unable to send me to college, my father gave me FCFA1500 (approx. \$3), which enabled me to start trading in clay pots, while exploring opportunities to someday attend college. This is a form of entrepreneurship deeply embedded within interdependent social relations. My father's gestures built in me love, respect and concern that I later transferred to my siblings, particularly the juniors that I struggled to educate above the primary school level. But I never regarded that as a free gesture; I also expected respect, love, and thought in return, especially in times of difficulty. This trust was aimed at building a strong united family that could contribute meaningfully towards the community fulfilling itself. *Life as njangi* was, thus, a chain of interconnected and ever inclusive intimacies, framed around interdependency and conviviality.

Trust, money and secondary education

I first met Petr van Persie in 1984, a young man from The Netherlands, working with the Credit Union league in the Cameroon Grassfields. I was working at a bar at the time, generally considered one of the lowest paying and less-dignified jobs. Some day in 1985, as he sat and sipped the beer I had served him, he summoned me unexpectedly, asked me to sit down, and looking straight into my eyes, said the following words, "John, since you told me that your father does not have the means to send you to college, I think I will help you pay your fees and you need to assure me that you will resign from this beer parlour and engage fully in your studies... You know ... my young friend, investing in an education is investment for the future."

My dream and aspiration of going to college was rekindled and my face beamed with joy and I told myself, "nobody will stop me nor convince me to drop the idea and hang onto a beer parlour where I could only learn how to drink, and how to be of service to those who come to drink." As my sponsor and social father took up the responsibility of educating me, I made a promise to myself on September 15th 1985 as the doors of the Secondary Grammar School I attended opened to me, "Never shall I fail Petr or betray the confidence and trust he has shown me. I will work hard in college and someday help my poor family towards a better life. God Guide me through." Even though I can never pay back Petr nor compensate him adequately, I have made a commitment to one day pay for a flight ticket for Petr to re-visit Cameroon to show my appreciation for all the good he has done for my family and me. Here was someone who we could easily have labelled and dismissed as "a stranger" or "a foreigner", but he was able to do for me what one would normally expect only a father or a close family member to do. What better proof of the open-ended and inclusive sociality of interdependence – in this case even transnational, as well as the idea that personhood and success only gain value and relevance when embedded in open-ended social relations.

Mobile money as facilitator of my education

In early 1985 when I went to college, people rarely talked about or had even seen a cell

phone in Cameroon. Fixed telephone services in rural areas like my home village at the time and till date are almost inexistent. Computer and Internet services also did not exist. Letter writing, money orders and coupons were sent through the post office and were thought of as towering symbols of mobility and interconnection in those days. Although communication in those days lacked the instantaneousness made possible by the proliferation of ICTs today, Petr and I, through the simple but vital art of letter writing and travelling by foot or by motorcar ensured that our relationship and indeed, my schooling, did not suffer.

Upon graduation from secondary school, I qualified and was admitted into the University of Buea, one of the top universities in Cameroon. In the early part of my undergraduate university life, ICTs, specially fixed telephones were mostly used and this service shaped my life and relationship with the world. Senior elites at the Post and Telecommunications School in Buea and the Regional Delegations of Lands and Surveys allowed me to use their fixed phone lines to call Petr whenever I needed to talk with him in the Netherlands. ICTs played an instrumental role in shaping and reshaping my life and education career and they facilitated the process of money 'flows' from the Netherlands, even though it took about three to four weeks to 'travel.' However, on one occasion, due to liquidity problems in 1993, I did not receive the money Petr sent me via the post office. See below the photo of the post office coupon that was never refunded to me.



As ICTs in those days did not match their current flexibility and fluidity, Petr and I created ingenious combinations of practices and technologies to achieve desired ends. Even though there was no Western Union, Express Union, Money Gram, and other money transfer technologies operating in the village at the time, Petr used the services of an alternative mobile money agent (Mench Credit Union Ltd) to open a junior deposit account (number 943 of 31st May 1986) and kept my school fees there. Besides the services of the credit union, in 1995, Petr simply sent a hand written mail instructing me to contact and collect money from the Late Father Paul to pay for my university education. Even later, in 2010 I had the opportunity to study in Europe for a Masters of Arts degree. When I returned home in June 2011 to do field research for my project, Petr continued to support me financially by crediting the account of his Dutch professor friend

who was travelling to Cameroon, who in turn gave me the money. I had grown up in a context where money was extremely rare, and even as a bar tender, I deliberately did not dwell on the anatomy of money in order to keep temptation at bay. For most of the time, the only relationship I had with money was as a point of transit – collecting from customers who came to drink, and handing it over immediately or soon afterwards to the bar owner, my employer. So you can well imagine how new to me any form of money transfer through banking and credit unions was. I was also not familiar with hard currency (I barely knew the FCFA), and so I did not understand the story of exchange rates from Dutch Guilders (at the time) to Cameroon FCFA. I trusted and believed in the bearer – Father Paul, who was acting on behalf of Petr – and I knew he never gave me money less than the amount sent. In fact, many a time he spent additional money from his personal account to help meet my educational needs.

From life is njangi to life na personal interest first: Expanding and betraying trust

From 1985 till date, my relationship with Petr has grown beyond that of a sponsor to that of a friend in need and indeed in all our engagements, trustfulness, frankness, openness and mutual respect for each other is cardinal. In respect of what he has done and continues to do for me, in 2005 I even named my first son after him, a powerful symbol of the bond that we share. Our relationship has now spread beyond just us to include both our children. His children address me as “senior brother.” Our relationship truly encapsulates the notion that *a child is one person’s only in the womb.*” It also challenges the general assumption where people stay frozen to ethnic affiliations and narrow family circles as roots for identification. However, while these philosophies and cultures of inclusivity and solidarity promise opportunities they are not without their opportunisms and opportunists. After all human relationships cannot be pre-determined because human beings behave in an unpredictable manner where trust and confidence may be abused, partly because of ego, greed, and self-interest. Conviviality and interdependency do not preclude disappointments, especially from the same people around whom relations of trust are constituted.

Being aware of the fact that my siblings were less educated than myself, I decided in 1996 to share my meagre financial resources provided by Petr to educate some of them. After completing my studies at the University of Buea I was unemployed for several years. I spent 10 years toiling, and doing odd jobs to provide for the educational needs of my siblings, in the spirit of *life as a njangi*. Petr too had sown a seed in me, and established a kind of ‘social contract’ that made me feel like I owed humanity and my family the responsibility to reciprocate. Such reciprocity did not have to be directed at Petr as such, but rather to continue the spirit of trust and generosity to others, as well as an investment in collective success. One good turn deserves another but the social actors involved do not always have to be the same.

With my help, my junior brother and sister wrote and passed their GCE “A” levels in 2007 and 2012 respectively. My brother was very lucky to be recruited into the Cameroon civil service, in the Ministry of Economy and Finance. I was confident that my brother and sister would show me the same trust, love and solidarity given the assumed

social contract, which defined our relationships. But my brother, fully aware of my role in his success, decided to make a family for himself without informing me. Since then, he has shown little care or concern for anybody except himself. He has developed an attitude of “If you have a problem that needs FCFA10,000 bring along FCFA9,000 so that I can add FCFA1000.” My sister on her part humiliated me and betrayed my trust. She went bananas, believing she could do absolutely as she likes in the age of freedom without responsibility. She emphasises that her life is her life, and her body is hers to abuse and disabuse as she sees fit. I reflect on the words of my late father (a man who died with the smile of fulfilment I had so dearly wanted to engrave on his face) who asked me to, “be an umbrella for my brother and sister ... and always play the role of elder brother.” But they both betrayed the trust I invested in them and failed to honour the sacrifices I made to educate them. So I now stay off any activity that concerns my opportunistic brother and sister. I have become very passive towards their endeavours, as my way of sanctioning them.

As I went about fieldwork for this project on mobile money (work that inspired me to revisit my own life and the extent to which mobile money has played a critical role therein), my ethnographic eye fell on key public declarations, writings and notices that some family houses and compounds carry in Bamenda and elsewhere in the Grassfields. I met James for instance, an agricultural economists trained in Europe. On the wall of his family compound is written, “*This Is Family Property, It is not for Sale, By Order 2010*” (See photograph below). My curiosity pushed me to ask him why he posted such a notice in bold letters. He narrated the story to me in these words: “My father died in 1998, and willed this compound to me as his successor. My two brothers were given plots in Nkwen ... and my old mother is still alive and has to enjoy her husband’s compound even though I am the “*chop chair* (successor or heir). Unfortunately, one of my younger brothers sold his parcel of land in Nkwen and is now going around saying that this family compound is for sale. He did photocopy the land certificate and is ready to sell our family compound. He is no longer trusted within our family circles. He is a ‘*fey-man*’ (a dubious and fraudulent trickster) so I was compelled to write this notice on the wall to make those who want to buy this compound from him stay away” (Taku 12/03/2014).



There were about 12 such notices around Bamenda alone implying that many family members, relatives and friends do betray the confidence of others. It may also signify that people nowadays may not often adhere to ideas of *life is njangi* but rather to “*life na personal interest first*,” meaning in life personal interest comes first. From James’ story, I came to the conclusion that sanctions against betrayals of trust vary; it may take the form of legal action as exhibited by James, it may be isolation, withdrawal of benefits and favours, etc., or it may be letting sleeping dogs lie for fear that one may be indicted by tradition and customs that may lead to ill luck on those who have sanctioned family members. However, the mobility of persons and the mobility of money play a central role in redefining the kinds of reciprocal relationships that Cameroon Grassfielders are constituting, and the forms of interdependency that determine personhood and understanding the mobility of money in a context of open-ended relationships of trust and intimacy provides for an understanding of the nuanced and complex intricacies of being and becoming human in an interconnected world.