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The Sultan of Bamum and French Colonial Reactions to the A ka u ku Script

L'Alphabet de Njoya. Le sultan des Bamoun et les réactions coloniales françaises à l'écriture A ka u ku

Kenneth J. Orosz

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According to tradition, in the mid-1890s Sultan Ibrahima Njoya of the Bamum people in northwestern Cameroon had a dream in which he was ordered to draw a picture of a hand on a slate, wash it, and then drink the water (Debargé 1928-1931: 244; Labouret 1935: 127)¹. Inspired by his dream, on awakening he convened his advisors and ordered them to spend the next month drawing symbols for objects they encountered on a daily basis. The resulting pictographs were then compiled and turned into the earliest written form of the Bamum language which the sultan soon began using to record the history of his people and communicate with palace officials. Njoya spent the next two decades refining his script and teaching it to the Bamum, eventually spreading literacy to over 1,000 of his subjects by 1916. Despite this promising start, usage of Njoya's alphabet plummeted during the inter-war years as Cameroon shifted from German to French control, eventually leading to its near extinction in the mid-1990s². Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, the reason for this precipitous decline was not because the French outlawed his script or forced the closure of Njoya's schools³. Rather, it was an unintended consequence of local inter-war politics and the sultan's clashes with the French colonial administration.

* K. TUCHSCHERER (2007: 52n38) explains that Njoya's alphabet is frequently misnamed *Shūmōm* by outsiders who conflate it with the name of the special court language that the sultan invented in 1913 to keep his communications secret.

1. O. G. S. CRAWFORD (1935) reprints Labouret's article in translation.
2. According to K. TUCHSCHERER (2007: 49) by the 1990s only one person, a traditional healer, was still using Njoya's script as his primary form of written communication. Most other Bamum, including Njoya's own descendants, are unable to even read it.
3. Recent examples of claims that the French took overt action against Njoya's schools and alphabet include S. MAFUNDIKWA (2004: 83), H. PASCH (2008: 86), J. H. MBAKU (2011: 54n117), H. FRENCH (1997) and M. AZANGEH TANDA FOR (2006).

Origins and Creation Njoya's Alphabet

The precise inspiration for Njoya's dream and his alphabet is a matter of some debate. Many scholars (Göhring 1907: 68; van Gennep 1908: 12-130; Debarge 1928-1931: 243-244; Eyongetah Mbuagbaw, Brain & Palmer 1987: 34; Geary 1988: 59) argue for a connection to written Arabic due to the activities of Hausa merchants and the presence in the palace at Fouban of several copies of the Koran and other Arabic books purchased at great expense by Njoya's father⁴. Arabic influence is also strongly suggested by the image in Njoya's dream of drinking water used to wash a slate, something which mimics Islamic practices. Some scholars (Dubié 1957: 344-345) also posit an European connection to Njoya's alphabet. Although the Bamum had no direct contact with Europeans until the German arrival in their capital of Fumban in 1902, all accounts agree that Njoya was well aware of both their trading activities on the coast and their possession of written language. More recently Tuchscherer (2007: 48-49) has made the case that traveling members of the Vai tribe from Sierra Leone might have inspired Njoya to develop his alphabet by exposing him to their own syllabary through their involvement in the slave trade and as contract laborers for Europeans in West Africa seeking porters, soldiers, and negotiators.

Regardless of from whence Njoya drew his inspiration, there is scholarly agreement that his alphabet was an independent innovation developed between 1895-1900, thus predating the German arrival in Bamum, and was driven by equal measures of intellectual curiosity and political necessity (Tardits 1980: 38-39, 57-58; Geary 1988: 59-60). Even his worst detractors describe Njoya as a highly innovative renaissance man possessed of great intelligence and eager to modernize his kingdom (Dippold 1973; Tardits 1990b; Temgoua 2011). As for political necessity, Njoya's hold on the throne was tenuous at the beginning of his reign. Bamum's expansion in the early 19th century created an atmosphere of intrigue and rebellion as nobles constantly jockeyed for power and position⁵. During one such episode, Njoya's father, Nsangu, was assassinated by his own brothers some time between 1885 and 1887. Since Njoya was only an adolescent at the time, his mother and a royal advisor named Gbetngnkom Ndombuo formed a regency and faced down several challenges to his right to the throne from the young king's cousins, uncles and brothers. Gebetngnkom's efforts to usurp royal powers after Njoya came to maturity and began ruling in his own right triggered a long running civil war in the mid 1890s which was only crushed with the aid of Bamum's traditional Fulani enemies in the north.

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4. M. CHIMOUN (2007) provides an overview of early scholarship on Bamum writing.
 5. Sous-Lieutenant Sartous, Commandant de la Subdivision [de Fouban], "Étude sur le Bamoum", March 1, 1917, Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter CAOM), SG Togo-Cameroun 31/318. For a brief overview of Bamum's expansion and political turmoil, see P. DUBIÉ (1957: 341-344), A. NJIASSÉ NJOYA *ET AL.* (1984: 19-22) and C. TARDITS (1992: 50-51).

Njoya was so impressed by the assistance provided by Lamdio Umaro of Banyo that he adopted Fulani style cavalry for his own army, built a mosque, and converted to Islam.

Based on the recent political turmoil that had plagued Bamum, Njoya became convinced of the need for a secure and verifiable means of communicating with his palace officials, village chiefs, and emissaries to foreign powers. Written Arabic was an obvious choice for such a means of communication given his early awareness of it and the presence of marabouts sent from Banyo to help instruct him and other Bamum converts to Islam (Delafosse 1922: 14; Debarge 1928-1931: 243; Tardits 1992: 53). As a result, and in hopes of encouraging diplomacy and promoting trade, Njoya began sending some of his subjects to learn Arabic in the Koranic schools of neighboring Hausa states. Shortly thereafter, however, he became worried about the growth of Hausa influence in his lands and concluded that Arabic was a dangerously insecure means of communication since both the Hausas and Germans could read it too. The Roman alphabet and European languages were similarly problematic in that their use was also insecure and could open the door to outside influence within his realm. Consequently, between 1895 and 1900 Njoya made the conscious and deliberate choice to reject both forms of writing in favor of developing one of his own instead (Göhring 1907; van Gennep 1908).

After charging his nobles and palace officials with drafting icons to portray material objects and convey abstract meanings (Delafosse 1922: 14), Njoya worked closely with a handful of royal advisors to vet and refine their submissions, eventually resulting in the creation of a pictographic system of writing composed of more than 1,000 symbols⁶. Shortly thereafter the sultan began personally instructing his nobles and palace officials in its use as a medium of correspondence. As he did so, however, it became increasingly clear that the current system was impractical. In addition to including too many symbols for users to remember, the new script also contained several confusing homonyms (Tardits 1990a: 230). Worse yet, many of the symbols used were quite complicated and difficult to reproduce. Eager to overcome these problems, Njoya spent the next two decades overseeing a series of revisions to reduce the number and complexity of signs used (Delafosse 1922: 16-17; Debarge 1928-1931: 244; Labouret 1935: 127), eventually converting them from pictographs to symbols representing spoken syllables⁷. Although Njoya continued to tinker with his invention for years,

6. According to K. TUCHSCHERER (2007: 47) while Njoya is rightfully credited with inventing the new script, evidence in mission archives and field research shows that two of his nobles (Nji Mama Pekekue and Adjia Njingboron) also played key roles in the process.

7. For a more detailed discussion of the many revisions, see I. DUGAST and M. D. W. JEFFREYS (1950). While the new script was initially written in any direction, Njoya eventually decreed that it be read left to right and top to bottom to further distinguish it from Arabic (NJIASSÉ-NJOYA *ET AL.* 1984: 31).

the most important changes came in 1910 during the sixth revision which produced the *A ka u ku* script by reducing the alphabet [technically a syllabary] down to 80 symbols, simplifying their graphics, and imposing a cursive format that made them easier to write and reproduce.

Bamum and Njoya under Colonial Rule

The development of the *A ka u ku* script was not the only monumental change to affect Bamum in the early 20th century. The Germans finally reached the western edge of the Grassfields in 1899 and spent the next several years conquering a number of small kingdoms in the region, eventually establishing administrative centers in nearby Bali and Bamenda (Ngho 1987: 32-35; Tardits 1992: 43-44). Although not yet directly affected by the German presence, Njoya had ample opportunity to observe the devastation meted out to those who resisted the European invaders. Consequently, when the Germans finally arrived in Fumban in 1902 rather than engage in a quixotic war of resistance the sultan worked to calm his people, welcomed the Germans with food, and set to work actively cultivating good relations with the new colonial administration (Paré 1966: 211-224; Geary 1988: 37-38; Tardits 2004: 47-50). For this he was rewarded with the decision to put Bamum under a form of indirect rule in which he retained all his traditional powers except the right to carry out executions or make war.

Njoya quickly impressed the Germans not only with his steady hand as a ruler and willingness to provide troops in the 1906 war against the Nso, but also his longstanding interest in economic affairs (Tardits 1992: 52). The sultan had been an early supporter of Bamum craftsmen and willingly embraced the cultivation of cash crops in hopes gaining a greater share of the lucrative export trade. The Germans were no less impressed by his warm welcome of missionaries and his clear commitment to education. As a result, Cameroon's new colonial masters saw him as a progressive and regarded his invention of writing as an interesting curiosity that proved his innate intelligence (Paré 1966: 219; Dippold 1973: 57-58; Tardits 1990b: 303-308). In the words of Governor Karl Ebermaier (1937: 245) the sultan of Bamum "[...] was the most capable, most intelligent, the most loyal of all the chiefs of Cameroon I have ever known".

Njoya's progressivism was, however, also self serving. Since he understood the need for his people to better communicate with the German authorities, the sultan readily agreed when the Basel Mission (BM) approached him in 1905 to negotiate opening a mission station and school in Fumban (Delafosse 1922: 17; Tardits 1992: 53; Loumpet-Galitzine 2006: 139-141; Chimoun 2007: 140-141). Njoya not only granted the necessary land, while the church and mission house were under construction he also sent several boys to the BM school in neighboring Bali where they could begin learning German. Meanwhile, the completion of its facilities in Fumban led the BM

to send Martin Göhring to open the local school in June 1906. Although initially hampered by unfamiliarity with Bamum, thus necessitating the temporary use of the neighboring Bali language as the medium of instruction, the missionaries worked quickly to learn the local language and develop Bible translations and other texts using the Roman alphabet and German gothic characters. Njoya, appreciative of the BM's work on behalf of his people, soon developed a warm rapport with Göhring and frequently attended the mission school to observe and assist with lessons. He also pointedly enrolled several members of the royal family as pupils and encouraged his nobles and vassals to do likewise. As a result, Göhring had 60 students by the end of the first year and soon opened more schools around Fumban with the help of missionary reinforcements and trained African school monitors, including the first Bamum graduates of the mission school in Bali.

Although Njoya had already been privately tutoring Bamum notables in his script for several years before the arrival of the BM, he was impressed by the growing success of the mission's schools and opted to build his own (Göhring 1907: 69; van Gennep 1908: 130; Heißenbüttel 2006). To that end, he purchased 66 slates from Göhring and began offering formal classes in Bamum history and the *A ka u ku* script to an ever increasing pool of students, both male and female, drawn from leading Bamum families. As these pupils became more adept in the use of Njoya's script, they were tasked with helping to spread it further by teaching in the growing number of Bamum schools (often referred to as *maison des livres*) established around the kingdom (Delafosse 1922: 15; Tardits 1990a: 235). The best known of these institutions was the palace school, known in German as the *Bamum Schule des Häuptlings Njoya*, which opened in 1910 to offer courses to local adults. Over the next several years Njoya's educational system grew so rapidly (Dugast & Jeffreys 1950: 9; Paré 1966: 224) that by 1918 he had 20 different schools scattered around his kingdom serving more than 300 pupils, some of whom had been actively recruited from neighboring Grassfields states⁸. This expansion bore steady fruit, increasing the number of *A ka u ku* literate Bamum from 600 in 1907 to over 1,000 by the early 1920s (Göhring 1907: 69; Delafosse 1922: 16).

This increase in Bamum literacy was matched by rising production of documents, texts and treatises using Njoya's alphabet. In addition to daily correspondence with his retainers and palace servants, the sultan began writing instructional texts as well as recording pharmacopeia, fables, and descriptions of Bamum customs (Debargé 1928-1931: 247; Labouret 1935: 129; Tardits 1992: 52). His magnum opus came in the form of a decades long project to compile a written history of the Bamum people. Starting in 1912 Njoya also created a true palace bureaucracy and ordered his officials to use the new script to record births, deaths, land sales and the result

8. P. DUBIÉ (1957: 347-348) and A. NJIASSÉ-NJOYA *ET AL.* (1984: 31) argue that the number of pupils in Njoya's schools was much higher, ranging from 600-1,000.

of court cases. The explosive growth of *A ka u ku* texts and documents soon led Njoya to begin experimenting with new production methods. By 1903 the Bamum had ceased to write with charcoal on banana leaves or wood in favor of adopting paper, ink, pens and pencils supplied by German merchants (Dugast & Jeffreys 1950: 63; Tardits 1990a: 232). To further increase the pace of producing Bamum language texts, in 1913 Njoya approached the Germans about developing a printing press for the *A ka u ku* script (Dugast & Jeffreys 1950: 29). When the Germans failed to respond, he commissioned a local craftsman to cast the necessary type in Fouban using the lost wax process. Sadly the press remained unused and was destroyed just after completion in 1920.

Shortly before the outbreak of WWI, Njoya began worrying that the success of these ventures had robbed his script of its very purpose since it was now widespread enough that it could no longer serve as a secret and secure form of communication (Tardits 1992: 52). His solution to this dilemma was to develop a secret language for the exclusive use of palace officials. The result, dubbed *Shiimom*, employed a random mix of words in English, French, and German which Njoya had phonetically transcribed into *A ka u ku*⁹. Each word was then randomly assigned a new meaning to create a secret language or code which only the sultan's inner circle knew. In an effort to make the written form of his secret language even harder for the uninitiated to understand, in 1918 Njoya tried to simplify *A ka u ku* yet again by cutting off or omitting portions of lines in the graphics of his script (Delafosse 1922: 19; Tardits 1990a: 234-235).

The Great War and its aftermath led to dramatic changes inside Cameroon that soon impacted Njoya and his alphabet in unexpected ways. After a successful invasion, in 1916 Anglo-French forces seized the last remaining enemy outposts and expelled the Germans, missionaries included, from the colony (Digre 1990: 25; Strachan 2004: chap. 4). Although Njoya had provided material aid to the Germans early in the war, ever the pragmatist, once it became clear that they were losing, he quickly reached out to British forces marching on Fumban, providing them with guides and supplies to facilitate their advance (Jeffreys 1947; Tardits 2004: 52). The British were quite pleased by this turn of events and often spoke highly of him, especially after he expressed a strong desire for his kingdom to remain under British control. Despite this, Njoya adapted easily when subsequent Anglo-French territorial agreements shifted his kingdom into the French occupation zone at the end of 1916¹⁰.

9. M. DELAFOSSE (1922: 18) and I. DUGAST (1950: 232-233) both argue that the BM missionary, Anna Wuhrmann, played an unwitting role in the creation of *Shiimom* by providing those words borrowed from European languages. Interestingly, Wuhrmann never took *Shiimom* seriously and maintained that it had been invented as little more than an amusement to pass the time.
10. "Circonscription de Fouban, Rapport politique pour la période du 1^{er} au 31 mai 1916", Cameroon National Archives Yaoundé (hereafter CNAY) APA 11919/A,

Like their German and British counterparts, the French were initially quite taken with Njoya, describing him in positive terms and opting to let him rule over local affairs free of interference¹¹. Above all, the French were impressed by his interest in economic matters and frequently held up his religious toleration and the invention of his alphabet as evidence of his progressive nature. During a visit to Foumban in 1918 Governor Lucien Fournieu made a point of visiting Njoya's schools where he approvingly observed lessons making use of the *A ka u ku* script (Delafosse 1922: 19; Tardits 2004: 53). The following year Njoya was decorated by the local administrator in gratitude for his welcome of French troops during the war and his subsequent prompt payment of taxes (Tardits 1980: 242). Even as late as the 1930s some French observers in the metropole continued to speak highly of Njoya's intelligence and his many reforms, particularly the invention and spread of his alphabet among the Bamum people (Chazelas 1931: 35; Labouret 1935: 127).

Inside Cameroon, however, attitudes towards the sultan and his activities took a sudden and dramatic turn for the worse in 1919. France not only received a provisional mandate over the territory that year from the League of Nations, but also dispatched a new Governor in the form of Jules Carde who was determined to Gallicize Cameroon as quickly as possible for a combination of practical, philosophical, and geo-political reasons (Orosz 2008: 192-197). Carde understood that the lack of resources in the aftermath of the war meant he would have to govern cheaply with limited personnel. His administration therefore could not afford to waste time and resources training French officials in Cameroon's many different indigenous languages¹². The obvious solution, which was also in keeping with the long French tradition of direct rule, was to impose French as the *lingua franca*. Doing so would also facilitate the economic development (*mise en valeur*) of Cameroon and prove France worthy of the mandate granted her by engaging in the cultural uplift of native peoples. Underlying this, however, was a less high minded principal. The French were determined to retain Cameroon permanently as territorial compensation for wartime losses. Since the League had only granted a provisional mandate which could theoretically be re-assigned, the French were determined to Gallicize Cameroon as quickly as

<<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2011919-A-3sm.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]. Regarding the war-time division of Cameroon see B. DIGRE (1990: 47-48, 63-74) and J. OSUNTOKUN (1977).

11. Sous-Lieutenant Sartous, "Étude sur le Bamoum", CAOM SG Togo-Cameroun 31/318; "Voyage d'Inspection de M. Le Gouverneur des Colonies", *Journal Officiel du Cameroun* (henceforth *JOC*) 3, no. 27 (1st November 1918), pp. 151-152; [Ripert], "Instructions à Monsieur le Chef de la Subdivision de Foumban", 22 October 1923, CNAY APA 11919/A, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2011919-A-2sm.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]; and C. TARDITS (1990b: 310-311).
12. Cameroon has more than 200 different indigenous languages (BINAM BIKOI 2012: 61).

possible so as to render it ungovernable by any other power. In this context the spread of the French language therefore became a form of insurance policy for their long term geo-political goals.

For the Carde administration anything which threatened these goals was to be viewed with hostility and suspicion. Increasingly this included both Njoya and his linguistic endeavors. According to Carde and his officials Njoya was already suspect (Geary 1988: 127) given his long history of close ties to the Germans and his stated preference for British rule in 1915¹³. His invention of a secret language written in an unfamiliar alphabet only deepened their suspicion since it appeared to be a perfect vehicle for subversive activities. Some officials even went so far as to accuse Njoya of having deliberately invented *Shümmom* “[...] to prevent the diffusion of a European language”¹⁴. The same could presumably have been said of the *A ka u ku* script. In fact, the more that Carde and his officials looked at Njoya, the more convinced they became that he was an impediment to progress and threatened the very success of the mandate. For example, local administrators increasingly began making the case, incorrectly, that Njoya was an absolute ruler who owned all the goods and people inside his kingdom and thus posed an obstacle to the implementation of *mise en valeur*¹⁵. What they did not understand was that by custom and tradition the kings of Bamum neither owned nor exploited community assets; instead they merely served as guardians of royal lands and either used tribute for charitable purposes or stockpiled it for use in case of famine.

These misunderstandings soon came to a head in the form of repeated clashes with Lt. Prestat, the newly appointed *Chef de la subdivision* in Fumban. Since the war was now over, the French were eager to resume their traditional form of direct rule, hence Prestat was charged with the task of limiting royal power in Bamum (Njiassé-Njoya *et al.* 1984: 50-51). Since he was young, ambitious, and eager to make a name for himself, Prestat often acted precipitously and provoked unnecessary clashes with Njoya when carrying out his orders¹⁶. Adding more fuel to the fire was his decision to hire Mosé Yeyap, a royal cousin with a long history of grievances against Njoya, as his interpreter (Dubié 1957: 367; Tardits 1990b: 311).

13. Njoya, King of the Bamum to the Great All-Powerful King of All the English [No date], Public Record Office, London, England, CO 649/7/10908.

14. [Governor Jules] Carde to Commandant Martin, 14 November 1919, CNAY APA 10006/G, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-G-2.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013].

15. *Ibid*; Inspector General of Colonies Maurice Meray to Minister of Colonies, 20 April 1920, CAOM 1Aff Pol 3138/12. Also see C. TARDITS (1987: 119-123, 1992: 53-54).

16. Chef de Bataillon Martin to Lieutenant-Colonel Commandant du Corps d'Occupation du Cameroun, 27 December 1919, CNAY APA 10006/G, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-G-1.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013].

At various points in his life Yeyap, a descendant of one of the assassins who had killed Njoya's father Nsangu in the mid-1880s, reopened the question of the royal succession and challenged Njoya's claim to the throne. Furthermore, as a devout Christian and former monitor at the BM school in Fouban (Tardits 1992: 53; Loumpet-Galitzine 2006: 143-144), Yeyap bitterly resented Njoya's decision to abandon religious toleration and his 1916 decree forcing Bamum Christians to convert to Islam¹⁷. When members of the Paris Mission, which had been charged with taking over the work of the ousted BM, visited Fumban the following year, Yeyap returned with them to Douala to enroll in their school and learn French¹⁸. On his return to Fumban in 1919, he was hired by the French administration and quickly began spewing his hostility towards Njoya into Prestat's willing ears (Tardits 1980: 245-246).

Convinced that the sultan was a dangerous threat to the French colonial mission, Prestat began his attack on Njoya and his powers in the summer of 1919 with a summons to a meeting where the young lieutenant condescendingly declared an end to any transition period and insisted that henceforth French directives were to be immediately implemented (Tardits 1980: 245-246, 1992: 53-54). Furthermore, whereas the Germans had largely ignored the issue of slavery in Bamum lest any efforts to suppress it destroy the region's economic progress, Prestat began arguing that Njoya was in violation of the 1905 French anti-slavery statute and faced fines and judicial action unless he began paying salaries to those working royal lands and ensured that his chieftains and subordinates did likewise. The young lieutenant then announced that he was assuming control over the judicial system in the subdivision and would hear appeals of all sentences meted out by palace courts which henceforward were limited to hearing cases involving minor infractions and had to abide by strict sentencing limits. Towards the end of the meeting Prestat, a staunch opponent of polygamy, also ordered Njoya to give up a large portion of his more than 1,200 wives.

Not content with these actions, a few weeks later Prestat accused Njoya of the twin crimes of instigating a plot to murder him and of hiding modern weaponry left by the Germans or possibly the British in preparation for a potential rebellion against French control¹⁹. Although the official enquiry

17. Njoya's actions stemmed from his concern about the rapid growth of Christianity in his kingdom—the numbers of converts had risen from a handful in 1909 to over 1,500 in 1915—and his resentment of missionary attacks on polygamy since in his eyes both issues threatened to undermine royal authority. He was also apparently struck by the presence of Muslim troops from Asia among the British forces which briefly occupied Fumban in 1915. As a result, he became determined to suppress Christianity and underscore his kingdom's links to Islam. For more on this subject, see H. MARTIN (1951: 33-37).

18. For a discussion of the Paris Mission's takeover of BM stations, see R. BLANC, J. BLOCHER and E. KRUGER (1970: 237-238).

19. Martin to Commandant du Corps d'Occupation du Cameroun, 27 December 1919, CNAY APA 10006/G; Rapport Annuel de Circonscription Bana 1919, CNAY

into these allegations soon exonerated the sultan on all counts, rather than replace Prestat, the government opted instead to impose a new round of reforms on Njoya that further reduced his political power. In addition to ordering an immediate end to the “persecution” of Christians, these reforms slashed the annual tribute paid to the palace in half and enforced Prestat’s earlier demands that Njoya begin paying the laborers on his farms and dismiss all but 200 of his wives and 100 of his servants²⁰.

Over the next several years French officials, from Prestat up to Governor Carde, increasingly portrayed Njoya as a capricious, vengeful tyrant who extorted tribute from his people and squandered it on an extravagant court life²¹. They also repeatedly encouraged the sultan’s subjects to sue him in government run courts on the grounds that they were being oppressed and underpaid by the palace (Tardits 1980: 247-252). The final indignity came when Prestat began encouraging Njoya’s male subjects to take royal wives as mistresses.

As intended, these “reforms” humiliated Njoya and seriously eroded royal power in Bamum. The decision to enforce French anti-slavery statutes not only flew in the face of Bamum history and custom which had long accepted the premise that conquered enemies were required to work the land for the benefit of their new overlords, it also cut into royal finances and weakened the palace by limiting its ability to dispense patronage. Requiring the sultan to police his subordinates and ensure that they paid their agricultural laborers naturally cut into his popularity among the nobles and further weakened support for the palace. Similarly, forcing Njoya to give up many of his wives, most of whom were only nominally married to him in *de jure* political arrangements, cut deeply into the traditional network of marriage alliances on which much of royal power was based. Convinced that the monarchy was being brought to its knees, some of Njoya’s subjects, including several of his own sons (Njiassé-Njoya *et al.* 1984: 51), began openly heckling the sultan, turned their backs on him in public, and showed other signs of disrespect²².

Although deeply shocked by these events, Njoya was determined to continue playing an active role in colonial policy by serving as the intermediary between the government and his people. In order to learn more about

APA 10006/H, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-H-1.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]; and [Governor] Marchand to Minister of Colonies, 16 April 1931, CAOM SG Togo-Cameroun 30/264; and C. TARDITS (1990b: 310-311).

20. [Ripert], “Instructions”, 22 October 1923, CNAY APA 11919/A. Also see A. NJIASSÉ-NJOYA *ET AL.* (1984: 50-51).
21. Ripert, Chef de la Circonscription de Dschang, to Commissaire de la République [Marchand], 23 October 1923, CNAY APA 11919/A, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2011919-A-1sm.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]; *Rapport annuel du Gouvernement français sur l’administration sous mandat des territoires du Cameroun* (hereafter *Rapport annuel*), 1924, p. 95.
22. Ripert to Commissaire de la République [Marchand], 23 October 1923, CNAY APA 11919/A.

the French, their goals, and their methods, he made a point of sending several of his sons to French language schools run by the Paris Mission so they could learn the new language of power and report back on the contents of any documents, books or newspapers they encountered (Njiassé-Njoya *et al.* 1984: 58; Eloundou & Ngapna 2011: 26). Rather than smooth relations, this initiative only deepened the rift between Njoya and the French authorities. After hearing that the French had killed their own king in 1789, Njoya became convinced that their continued comments about limiting royal power in Bamum were simply a prelude to his eventual destruction.

The situation came to a head in 1924 after the French opted to reorganize the local administrative structure by dividing Bamum into 15 cantons under *chefs de région* overseen by a *chef supérieur*, all of whom were appointed by the government²³. This cut into royal power by disrupting the traditional Bamum political system under which the sultan drew advisors or *tchindas* from lineage chiefs [akin to clan leaders] who wielded economic, military and judicial authority over members of their extended family network. Traditionally, sultans presided over this arrangement both by heading the most important lineage and by marrying into the others. Under the new system, however, instead of answering to Njoya, *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs* were loyal and responded only to the government that appointed them. Moreover, sensing the growing weakness of the palace, the newly appointed *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs*, many of whom were longstanding Njoya opponents, began encroaching on traditional royal powers such as dispensing land to those in need. Horrified by the latest attacks on the sultan, which they blamed on the machinations of Mosé Yeyap, thousands of armed pro-monarch Bamum gathered in Fumban in mid-May to demand the troublesome interpreter's removal²⁴. Responding to what it saw as a riot, the government ordered the crowd to disperse, arrested several of the ringleaders, and took additional actions against Njoya. Over the next several days French officials refused to recognize his authority over anything but the palace, forced him to dismiss more servants, and banned the collection of

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23. Capitaine [Hercule] Paulignan, Commandant de la Circonscription de Fouban, to Commissaire de la République française au Cameroun, 27 January 1923, CNAY APA 10006/C, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-C-9.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]; Marchand to Chef de la Circonscription de Dschang, November 8, 1923, CNAY APA 10006/C, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-C-10.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]. Also see C. TARDITS (1980: 253-255) and C. GEARY (1988: 127). For a brief overview of the Bamum political system, see C. TARDITS (1987: 110-123).
 24. Njoli Mbaliwa *et al.* to Commissaire de la République française, July 22, [1925], CNAY APA 10006/C, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-C-8.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013]; F. Quer, Chef de la Subdivision de Fouban, to [Ripert] Chef de la Circonscription de Dschang, 10 September 1925; Ripert to Commissaire de la République au Cameroun, 21 September 1925, CNAY APA 10006/C, <<http://condor.depaul.edu/mdelance/ArchiveDocs/APA%2010006-C-8.pdf>> [accessed May 28, 2013].

the traditional tribute owed to the sultan (Tardits 1980: 255; Eloundou & Ngapna 2011: 29-30). In its place Njoya was given an allowance of 18,000 francs payable in monthly installments.

To many Bamum nobles this rendered Njoya little more than a French vassal. The more ambitious among them took this a step further and argued that he could be ignored with impunity since their own advancement was now exclusively dependant on demonstrating their loyalty to France through active support of government initiatives. Chief among these initiatives was the ongoing effort by Governor Theodore Paul Marchand, Carde's replacement, to increase the spread of the French language by expanding public and private schools in preparation for implementing the policy of *mise en valeur* (Orosz 2008: 259-261).

Although Njoya often retreated to his plantations in Mantoum, a small farm village a few kilometers from Foumban, for long periods in the aftermath of the 1924 crisis, he did not renounce his political role within the kingdom and repeatedly contested the powers and boundaries assigned to the newly created *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs* (Tardits 1980: 257, 260; Eloundou & Ngapna 2011: 30-39). As the local Bamum power struggle deepened, the more ambitious chiefs, with Mosé Yeyap's guidance and assistance, used the occasion of Governor Marchand's visit to Foumban in March 1931 to lodge a series of complaints alleging that Njoya frequently obstructed the completion of their official duties²⁵. In response to these allegations, Marchand ordered Njoya to withdraw from political life and stay in Mantoum under a form of house arrest for the next six months. When the sultan refused to comply and instead solicited thousands of his supporters to demonstrate in protest Marchand had him arrested and sent into exile in Yaoundé where he died two years later on May 30, 1933.

The Fate of Njoya's Alphabet

Given the colonial regime's hostility to Njoya and the onset of its Gallicization campaign, it is understandable why so many people conclude that the French must have abolished his alphabet and closed his schools²⁶. There is, however, no evidence to support this in the historical record. The French published all their laws and decrees in the *Journal officiel du Cameroun* and reprinted them in their annual reports to the League of Nations, yet nowhere on their pages are there any references to either a ban on Njoya's alphabet or enforced closures of his *maison des livres*²⁷. Moreover, as part

25. Marchand to Minister of Colonies, 16 April 1931, CAOM SG Togo-Cameroun 30/26. Also see A. NJIASSÉ-NJOYA *ET AL.* (1984: 60).

26. For additional examples, see A. NDAM NJOYA (1977: 101-102), M. HARBSMEIER (1988: 270), and NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART (2007).

27. JOC 1916-1936; and *Rapport annuel* 1921-1939.

of their inter-war campaign to regain their colonies the Germans kept close watch on French activities in Cameroon and maintained a vocal press campaign regarding any actions they felt overstepped the boundaries of the mandate (Joseph 1975; Orosz 2008: 295). Given their high regard for Njoya and their eagerness to denounce French policies in Cameroon, the Germans would have eagerly seized upon the opportunity to publicize and vilify any effort to outlaw indigenous alphabets and suppress African run schools. The fact that no such claims were aired in the German press strongly indicates that no such activities ever took place.

Similarly, despite decades of work by historians, ethnographers and linguists looking into the history of Cameroon and the creation of Njoya's alphabet, no one has ever published documents or even cited archival materials in support of allegations that the French actively attempted to destroy Njoya's script. While his alphabet did have some subversive potential in that it could be used to transmit political messages that would have been difficult for the French to read, it was hardly a secret form of communication since the means for decoding it had already been published in 1907 (Göhring 1907) and the French already had several Bamum literate people on their payroll as interpreters. Furthermore, claims (Mafundikwa 2004: 83; Mbaku 2005: 73) that the French destroyed Njoya's printing press and burned his books are simply untrue. Shortly after the *A ka u ku* press was completed in 1920 Njoya himself, despondent about the recent clashes with Prestat, seized the metal type and had it all melted down (Dugast & Jeffreys 1950: 29). Furthermore, the only case of Bamum language book burning also seems to have been done by the sultan rather than the French. Njoya was upset to find out shortly after the BM had been ousted from Cameroon in 1916 that Christian converts had been writing up Bamum history and customs for the missionaries using the Roman alphabet (Loumpet-Galitzine 2006: 144-145). The sultan worried that this revealed too much information about the kingdom of Bamum to outsiders, so he had the converts involved beaten and burned their notebooks.

If the French did not burn books, destroy the *A ka u ku* printing press, ban Njoya's alphabet, or pass laws closing his schools, why then did his script effectively die out? Ultimately it fell victim to the realities of colonial education and local politics. Despite the steady growth of Njoya's schools, efforts to spread his script had only just begun and were still limited to a small group of Bamum elite when Njoya began sending some of his subjects and his own sons to mission schools where they learned to read and write in European languages (Tardits 1990a: 238, 2004: 49). While this was a pragmatic decision to facilitate communications and foster better relations with the colonizers, doing so undercut support for his own alphabet since the sultan himself seemed to place less value on it than he did European languages and scripts. As a result, there was little incentive for Bamum notables to continue sending pupils to the sultan's schools, causing literacy rates in *A ka u ku* to stagnate and eventually decline. Similarly, the lack of

an *A ka u ku* printing press made it difficult to teach the masses to read and use Njoya's script since they rarely got to see examples of it. Meanwhile, as part of their evangelical efforts, the missions (BM and Paris Mission) worked hard to develop school and religious texts in the Bamum language using roman characters which were mass produced on mission printing presses and mimeograph machines. The end result was that romanized versions of Bamum became far more ubiquitous and simply out-competed *A ka u ku*.

Even more importantly, however, Njoya's schools, which were designed to be engines of promoting literacy in *A ka u ku*, were outmatched by government and mission run educational institutions. From the start of his administration Carde was determined to get the missions to play a more active role in helping to spread French and train desperately needed African functionaries for use by merchants or the government. To that end he passed laws regulating private education in October 1920 and July 1921 (Orosz 2008: 219-241). Under the terms of these laws, recognized schools received government subsidies in exchange for using an official curriculum taught in French by credentialed personnel which, in the case of African teachers, took the form of a *diplôme de moniteur* awarded to candidates who passed a series of exams conducted in French. Unrecognized schools, on the other hand, including both catechism schools run by missions and African run institutions like Njoya's schools, were free to use vernaculars, could employ uncredentialed teachers, and could offer any content they wished. They were, however, at a significant disadvantage since unrecognized schools received no government monies and, in the case of Njoya's *maison des livres*, could no longer count on financial support from the sultan after the French slashed his tribute receipts in half and then replaced them altogether with a monthly government stipend in 1924. Moreover, unlike recognized institutions, Njoya's schools did not prepare students to earn the *certificat d'études* necessary to obtain jobs with the French administration or European owned businesses. The end result was that pupils generally voted with their feet and abandoned them at the earliest opportunity. While the government hoped that the students' response would pressure the missions to convert their unrecognized schools into recognized institutions, Njoya's schools could never do so since their core mission—teaching Bamum history and the *A ka u ku* script—was precluded by the official curriculum. As a result, starting in 1920 the sultan's schools began withering away and eventually died due to falling enrollments (Johnston & Malcolm 1921; Dugast & Jeffreys 1950: 100; Ndam Njoya 1977: 101).

Local politics also played an important role in hastening this process. Most of the *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs* appointed by the French were ambitious men who saw the sultan as a political rival and thus jealously sought out every opportunity to increase their own authority by usurping his. Consequently, they had little interest in either using Njoya's script or sending pupils to his schools since doing so would perpetuate the sultan's

influence and provide him an opportunity to use classes as a bully pulpit on the subject of traditional royal power. Conversely, the *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs* needed to demonstrate their gratitude and loyalty to the government which had elevated them, hence they had a vested interest in learning French and directing their people into those schools, public or private, which taught in French, used the roman alphabet, and trained pupils in the practical skills necessary for *mise en valeur*. As the government became increasingly hostile to Njoya, even the monarchist faction among Bamum realized that the sultan and his *A ka u ku* script were on the losing side of history. Continued loyalty to either, particularly in the face of the official Gallicization campaign, was sure to arouse the wrath of local authorities and would result in unpleasant repercussions. This lesson was reinforced by Governor Marchand's bitter clash with the Catholic Spiritan missionaries over what he felt was their failure to adequately support the spread of French language in their schools. In an effort to goad the Catholics into compliance, his administration prosecuted priests for slander, accused the mission of using forced labor, and embarked on the so called "catechist war" in which mission stations were closed and native catechists imprisoned for failing to secure necessary permits (Orosz 2008: 276-296; 2012). Given the government's willingness to lash out at the Spiritan mission, which after all was run by white French citizens, it was clear to the Bamum that clinging to Njoya's alphabet could not only hold one back by denying access to skills needed to acquire jobs in the colonial economy, but could also lead to unnecessary exposure to the wrath of the government with painful results. As such, anyone seeking education naturally turned instead to developing literacy in French.

While local artists and craftsmen might have served as an alternate method for preserving and possibly spreading the use of *A ka u ku* among the masses, Njoya's decision to retreat to his plantations after the 1924 crisis prevented them from doing so. Since the palace was no longer buying their work, many Bamum artisans faced real economic hardship (Tardits 2004: 55). What saved them was intervention by the French. Local administrators not only set aside a street in central Foumban for their workshops, they also began buying carvings and other forms of artwork to decorate government offices. On a more personal level, individual administrators and their families began commissioning local artisans to produce European objects like dishes and table linens for use at home. Eager to cash in on this new market, Bamum artists and craftsmen began moving from traditional crafts and decorations to more European friendly ones. In so doing, they eliminated a possible mechanism for keeping Njoya's alphabet at the forefront of Bamum life. The end result was that *A ka u ku*, never particularly widespread, fell out of favor and began to disappear, causing French anthropologist Josette Debarge (1928-1931: 244) to comment as early as 1930 that it was "[...] no longer used [...] except by the sultan and his courtiers".

Njoya's exile and eventual death further hastened the demise of his alphabet by removing its use from daily view and by provoking a succession crisis which made it impossible for his heirs to take action to revive the use of *A ka u ku* within the kingdom. Before departing for exile in Yaoundé Njoya had taken the precaution of dispersing the royal regalia, from which sultans derived their authority, among his supporters, including a son named Moussa whom he initially named as his heir (Njiassé-Njoya *et al.* 1984: 65-68; Eloundou & Ngapna 2011: 57, 68).

When Moussa, who had fled to the British section of Cameroon, refused to return to Foumban and prepare to inherit the throne from his dying father he precipitated a crisis that threatened the very survival of the monarchy. Determined to find a solution, Njoya convened his advisors and named another son and long time secretary-interpreter Seidou Njimoluh, as his new heir. When Njoya died a few weeks later the French briefly toyed with announcing the end of the monarchy but, after consultations with leading Bamum notables, opted instead to retain the position of sultan as a figure-head whose moral authority could be harnessed in support of government decisions. The question then became which of Njoya's sons should inherit. Given Moussa's refusal to return home, the government had no choice but to reluctantly accept Seidou Njimoluh as the new sultan. The Bamum notables, especially the *chefs supérieurs*, were, however, another story. Since Njimoluh lacked the royal regalia and had not been crowned before the official announcement of his father's death as called for by Bamum custom, many argued that he had no legitimate claim to the throne.

Given the nature of the succession crisis, Njimoluh was fully aware that he had to proceed cautiously. Moreover, since he had long served as his father's secretary and interpreter, having become literate in both French and *A ka u ku* due to his schooling in the palace and mission schools in Foumban, he personally witnessed what Njoya had gone through at the hands of the French and was determined to avoid the same fate (Tardits 2004: 57). As a result, he spent the first several decades of his reign working to assert the legitimacy of his claim to the throne and prove his loyalty to the French. To that end he began negotiating for the return of the royal regalia which Njoya had dispersed among his loyal followers. This process culminated in 1948 when Moussa returned to Fumban and acknowledged him as the rightful heir to the throne (Abwa 1999; Njiassé-Njoya 1999; Eloundou & Ngapna 2011: 74-77). At the same time, Njimoluh also worked constantly to prove his loyalty to the French so as to ensure the survival of the monarchy. Hence, in 1938 when local administrators organized Francophile natives into the *jeunesse camerounaise française* to combat German agitation for the return of their colonies, Njimoluh joined immediately. Similarly, during WWII, he actively supported the Free French cause and even raised an army in Foumban to assist with the war effort. The French rewarded his demonstrations of loyalty by supporting his efforts to reassert control over the *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs*, eventually ordering his inclusion in the local

administrative hierarchy. After the war Njimoluh launched a political career in which he served as the elected mayor of Foumban and as a member of the newly created *Assemblée représentative du Cameroun* where he worked with other political leaders to secure a peaceful transition to independence that retained close ties to France. His father's script clearly had no place in any of this and was thus allowed to languish inside Bamum for the remainder of the French presence in Cameroon²⁸.

After independence was granted in 1960 Njimoluh became a government official and had to continue walking a tightrope to preserve the existence of his kingdom within the Republic of Cameroon (Tardits 2004: 57-62; Heißenbüttel 2006: 8). As a result, use of Njoya's script nearly became extinct as elderly *A ka u ku* literate Bamum died off. Today the alphabet remains alive only because Njimoluh opened a new school in 1985 to teach his father's script and because the US Embassy funded a project launched in 2005 with the cooperation of the current sultan, Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, to preserve and eventually digitize records kept in the palace archive and private hands²⁹.

While the French clearly played a role in creating this sad state of affairs *via* their hostility to Njoya, the end of the tribute system in Bamum, and the creation of *chefs de région* and *chefs supérieurs* who persistently challenged royal authority, the charges that they actively sought to destroy Njoya's script by outlawing it and suppressing his schools are simply not supported by the historical record. Neither the *Journal officiel du Cameroun*, the annual French reports to the League of Nations, or the German press record any attempt to outlaw the use of Njoya's alphabet. Similarly, no one making such claims has ever provided any documentary proof to support their arguments. Instead, Njoya's alphabet seems to have been the victim of local Bamum politics and the pragmatic decision by many of his subjects to abandon it in favor of the Roman alphabet and literacy in French. Consequently, while France, like all colonial powers, has much to answer for in terms of its impact on indigenous peoples, in this instance demonizing it for the near extinction of Njoya's alphabet is quite simply wrong and distorts our understanding of both French colonial policy making and early 20th century Cameroonian history.

Department of History and Social Studies Education, Buffalo State College, Buffalo, New York, USA.

28. LABOURET (1935: 129) called on him in 1935 to donate examples of his father's alphabet to western archives and museums lest it be lost forever.

29. Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya became sultan on the death of his father Njimoluh in 1992 (TARDITS 1992: 54). For the reopening of the palace school to teach the Bamum script, see D. HEIßENBÜTTEL (2006: 8) and K. TUCHSCHERER (2007: 49). The Bamum Scripts and Archives Preservation Project is discussed in T. MUSA (2006) and H. PASCH (2008: 86). The project's website can be found at <<http://bamumscript.org/>> [accessed May 25, 2012].

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ABSTRACT

Shortly before the turn of the century Sultan Njoya of Bamum developed an independent written script to record the history of his people and provide a secure means of communication for royal affairs. The final version of his script, dubbed *A ka u ku*, was hailed by German colonial authorities as a symbol of intelligence and Njoya's progressive character. The French initially held equally positive visions of Njoya when they replaced the Germans as Cameroon's new colonial master in the wake of WWI. By the 1920s, however, their regard for Njoya was replaced by a growing antipathy which eventually led to the sultan's arrest and exile to Yaoundé. Since the use of *A ka u ku* declined in the same period scholars have argued incorrectly for decades that it must have been outlawed by local French authorities as part of their campaign to undermine Njoya and curtail his power. In reality, Njoya's script simply fell victim to inter-war politics and the clear material advantages to those Bamum who acquired literacy in French.

RÉSUMÉ

L'Alphabet de Njoya: le sultan des Bamoun et les réactions coloniales françaises à l'écriture A ka u ku. — Peu avant le tournant du siècle, le sultan Njoya des Bamoun a développé une écriture indépendante pour enregistrer l'histoire de son peuple et fournir un moyen de communication sécurisé pour les affaires royales. La version finale de son écriture, nommée *A ka u ku*, a été saluée par les autorités coloniales allemandes comme un symbole de l'intelligence et du caractère progressiste de Njoya. Les Français ont d'abord eu une approche positive de Njoya quand ils ont remplacé les Allemands comme nouveaux maîtres coloniaux du Cameroun après la Première Guerre mondiale. Cependant, dans les années 1920, leur respect pour Njoya s'est transformé en antipathie croissante qui a finalement conduit à l'arrestation et à l'exil du sultan à Yaoundé. Comme l'utilisation d'*A ka u ku* a diminué durant la même période, les chercheurs ont fait valoir à tort pendant des décennies qu'elle avait été interdite par les autorités locales françaises dans le cadre de leur campagne visant à affaiblir Njoya et à limiter son pouvoir. En réalité, l'écriture de Njoya a été simplement victime de la politique de l'Entre-deux-guerres et des avantages matériels évidents accordés aux Bamoun qui ont acquis l'alphabétisation en français.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Cameroon, Bamum, Njoya, Shūmom, writing *A ka u ku*/Cameroun, Bamoun, Njoya, Shūmom, écriture *A ka u ku*.