

The Shumom People

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The Shumom people are the people of Cameroon in West Africa. Their country is located between Nigeria in the West, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Congo Brazzaville in the South and Chad and Central African Republic in the North. Within Cameroon, the land of the Shumom people is located in the northern part. It is a land of massif plateau and mountains, valleys and vast forested land, a part of the great equatorial forest of West and Central Africa. Fomban is the administrative capital of the district.

In the beginning of the 20th century or perhaps earlier, the people of Cameroon were able to accomplish one of the most remarkable African achievements of the century: the invention of a self-sustaining and selfgoverning writing system and a printing device to document the histories of the people. Sultan Ibrahim Njoya, whose father was killed resisting the German invaders, led the invention. The invention that started in the late nineteenth century (1895 or 1896) was completed by the beginning of the 20th century in 1903. By the time of the Germans arrival, the writing system was in use in conjunction with the Bamum language, which is a tonal language, which means the meanings of a word will vary depending upon the tone with which the sound of the word is uttered. The system went through seven stages of development. The first stage had over five hundred pictographs and the last stage has had only 35 syllographs, graphs designed to represent all the phonetic and tone sounds in the Bamum language of the Shumom people.

King Njoya opened a school in Fumban where many are trained to become literate and promote learning in their own language. Several manuscripts and documents were produced, including the histories, laws and customs of the people and their neighbors. Two systems of writing were taught at the school: the Royal and the popular scripts. Tragically the most important documents are taken away by colonial masters out of Cameroon and they are housed in the French and British Museums. The Germans and later the French did not want to see the flourishing of a literary tradition among the Bamums. Not only they killed or exiled their leaders; they also violently banned the use of Shumom, thereby condemning the people to colonial dark age.

The remarkable accomplishments of the Cameroonians is in line with the long and glorious traditions of the inventions and use of writing systems, perhaps beginning with the hieroglyphics of the Ancient Egyptians whose earliest pictographic writing now dated to be 3400B.C.

The Shumom writing system was invented and used in such a participatory democracy where all the members of the society are asked by the king to participate in the project. King Njoya, the able and visionary leader, ordered his constituency to contribute symbols for the writing system. In so doing not only he succeeded in ensuring a wide range of ideographic ideas to choose

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from, but he also paved the way for eventual acceptance of the system by the whole nation. This process combined with mythology would place the system as permanent cultural asset and legacy of the people.

King Njoya mythologized the invention of the Shumom writing system as follows:

"When King Njoya was asleep one night he had a dream. A man came and before him saying: "Oh King, take a wide, flat piece of wood and mark on it a man's hand. Then wash the board and drink the water." The king took a plank and made a mark as the man directed, and handed it to that man who also made a mark thereon and returned the plank to the King. In the dream there were many people sitting around, all schoolboys, and they had paper in their hands. They all made marks thereon and passed on what they marked to their neighbors.

"When it was daylight the King took a wide plank and marked thereon a man's hand. He then washed the plank with water and drank it, as the man in the dream directed. The King now summoned many of his courtiers and told them to mark out many things and to give names to all these things so that the result would be a book. In this way man's speech could be inaudibly recorded.

"Njoya asked whether the populace would be able to understand this silent speech. His courtiers replied: "No, if things are done as you wish, no one will be able to interpret these marks." Njoya asked whether it would not be as well to carry out his suggestions, and they replied: "It is no use, no one will understand the meaning of these marks." Njoya said to them: "Go, sleep and ponder over the matter till it become clear."

"The next day he summoned all his courtiers again and asked them, saying: "What now do you think about this matter, this book business?" They replied that if he did as he suggested no one would be able to interpret the marks. Njoya said he agreed with them, and told them to leave the matter with him and he would try, and if the problem were too much for him he would abandon it. Nevertheless his courtiers were to make many signs, all different, and to bring them to him. He also made many signs.

"The King now collected all these signs, and called in Moma and Isiah (two Mohammedan Mallams) to help him plan. Five times he consulted with these two and by then he understood

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enough. When Njoya consulted with them again the problem was solved. Then he called together many of his courtiers and taught them the signs. Many people learnt and King Njoya was very pleased."2

King Njoya's magnum opus in the royal script ran to 1,100 pages and its replica is now with the Pitt-Rivers Museum of Oxford. The published text regarding the writing system was the combined works of MDW Jeffreys and Madam Dugast of France in 1950 under the title: L'écriture des Bamum and it was published in France.

King Njoya had also successfully surveyed and produced a map of his nation. This is also a remarkable feat by itself. Just imagine the natural and progressive development of the people of Cameroon without the rude and violent and destructive intervention of European colonialism!

The African Writing Systems Website Project presents the original and the final forms of the Shumom writing system. The original pictographs are truly magical with their artistic renderings of the lives and imaginations of the people. It was a joy reproducing them in their entirety.

Shumom Writing System (Original form)

For more information about Our Writing Systems:

http://www.library.cornell.edu/africana/Writing_Systems/Welcome.html

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