

Title: Report on work with the Bamum script in Cameroon  
Source: Bamum Scripts & Archives Project, Charles Riley  
Date: 2006-09-21

In order to proceed on developing an encoding proposal for the Bamum script, I traveled to the town of Foumban, Cameroon at the invitation of the Royal Palace of Foumban and the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project in August of 2006. My intention was to meet with representatives of the palace, and with speakers of the Bamum language who use the script to varying degrees. I was greeted at the field site by Dr. Konrad Tuchscherer, professor of history at St. John's University, who has worked closely with the Bamum community for many years and who is leading a project to ensure the survival of archival materials written using the script housed at the palace.

Before reaching Foumban, I spent the morning of August 7th at the library of the SIL bureau in Yaoundé, where with the help of SIL staff I located and photocopied from some secondary sources on Bamum that had been published locally. This included selected pages from a copy of a paper by Benjamin N. Konhouet, titled *La langue Bamoun 'Shüipamem' possède-t-elle un système de conjugaison? (Can a conjugation system be applied to the Bamum language?)*, and the Bamum-script section of *Ɖga nsapɲam: Recueil de Proverbes Bamum (Collection of Bamum Proverbs)*, attributed to Ibrahim Njoya, translated and presented by Emmanuel Ghomsi, Aboubakar Njiassé Njoya, and Martin Njimotapon Njikam. This edition was published in 1987.

I arrived late on the night of the 7th in Foumban, and settled into the Hotel Rifum across town from the palace. Dr. Tuchscherer introduced me the next morning to a practitioner of traditional medicine, Zakari Nkepu, for whom the Bamum script is his only means of writing, as he left the formal francophone school system at an early age, without having become literate in the Latin script. This was the first of several mornings spent with Zakari, who also went by the nickname of "German".

Most afternoons were spent, together with members of the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project, examining papers from a box of manuscripts and fragments of documents, mostly dating from the 1920s and after, representing what Dugast and Jeffreys identify as phases C, D, and E of the script. The project is co-directed by the curator of the palace museum, Mr. Oumarou Nchare, and involves the participation of Zakari, Oumarou Nsangou, Abdoulaye Mbouombouo, Samuel Gbetnkom, and several other students. They had available to them multiple copies of a section out of Dugast & Jeffreys that served as a reference point in identifying archaic versions of the script, and were making their way through each item by recording its dimensions and condition, and transcribing as much as possible. At the request of the project team, I made extra copies of the *Ɖga nsapɲam* packet available that I had brought from Yaoundé.

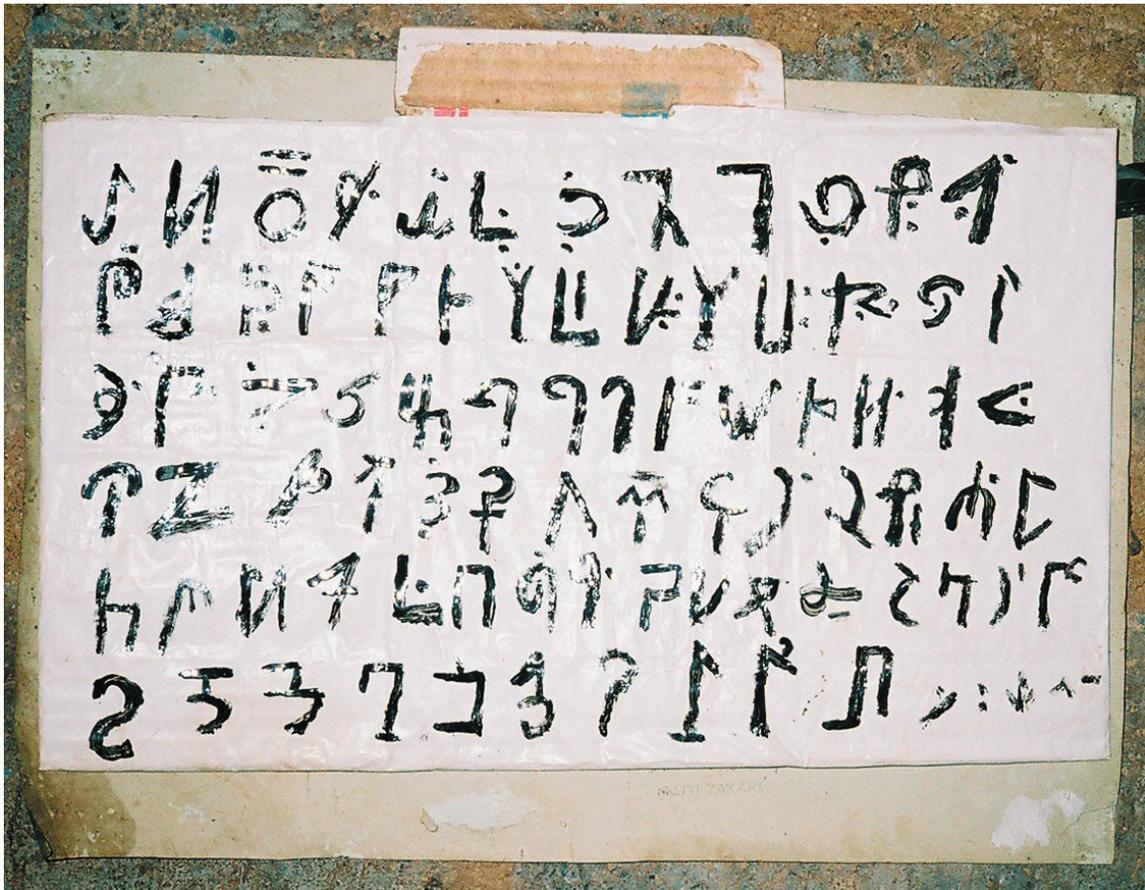


Fig. 1. A-ka-u-ku, the modern form of the script. Written in brush script by Zakari Nkepu and posted at his workplace for teaching purposes.

I made a recording of a recitation by Zakari and Abdoulaye Nguengue of the phase of the script in modern use, the *A-ka-u-ku*, which has an established syllabic order. Recordings of some of the phonemic contrasts to distinguish between individual syllables were also made. One of the potentially problematic areas will be in establishing a basis for a sort order for the archaic phases of the script. The order given by Dugast and Jeffreys, based loosely on chronology, offers some precedent, but it is not inherently deterministic, as there are instances where a character was introduced during one phase, disappeared in the next, and reappears in a later phase, for example. Alternatives to this approach may include reverse chronological order, or ordering by the spelling of the character name in the modern form of the script. Spelling is variable, but together with Oumarou Nchare, Mefire Njikam Saïd, and Abiba Moulim, I worked out a set of proposed spellings that could serve to establish the basis for such an order.

The recordings should also be helpful in determining the value of one vowel that Dugast and Jeffreys have identified in Bamum usage as  $\text{u}$  (unrounded, near back, close). Emmanuel Matateyou's *Parlons Bamoun* identifies the same vowel as  $\text{u}$  (rounded, central, close). From what I recorded and saw, I observed the value of the sound to be closer to an unrounded vowel.

Published secondary sources I collected in Foumban included an extract from *Je voudrais apprendre l'écriture Shümom*, by Oumarou Nchare ('Shü-' is a prefix referring to language; 'Shümom' refers more precisely to an artificial language invented by Ibrahim Njoya in the early 20th century, as opposed to 'Bamum' or 'Shüpamum', which refers to the script that can be used to write either the Bamum language or in Shümom), as well as a more recent work by Nchare titled *The Writting [sic] of King Njoya: Genesis - Evolution - Use*. This later document was published recently, but still before a Bamum font was yet available, so the pages with Bamum script are handwritten in pen, and contain some errors as a result. Mr. Nchare pointed out to me the errata contained in the book, relating to the forms of some of the glyphs and the shapes of some punctuation. The two works above both relate to the *A-ka-u-ku* phase of the script uniquely, with reference to its use in writing the Shümom language. I also picked up a third book, *Syllabaire en Langue Bamoun: Ndâ Shükét Pamom*, by Jean Ndane, which treats the Bamum language in Latin transcription.

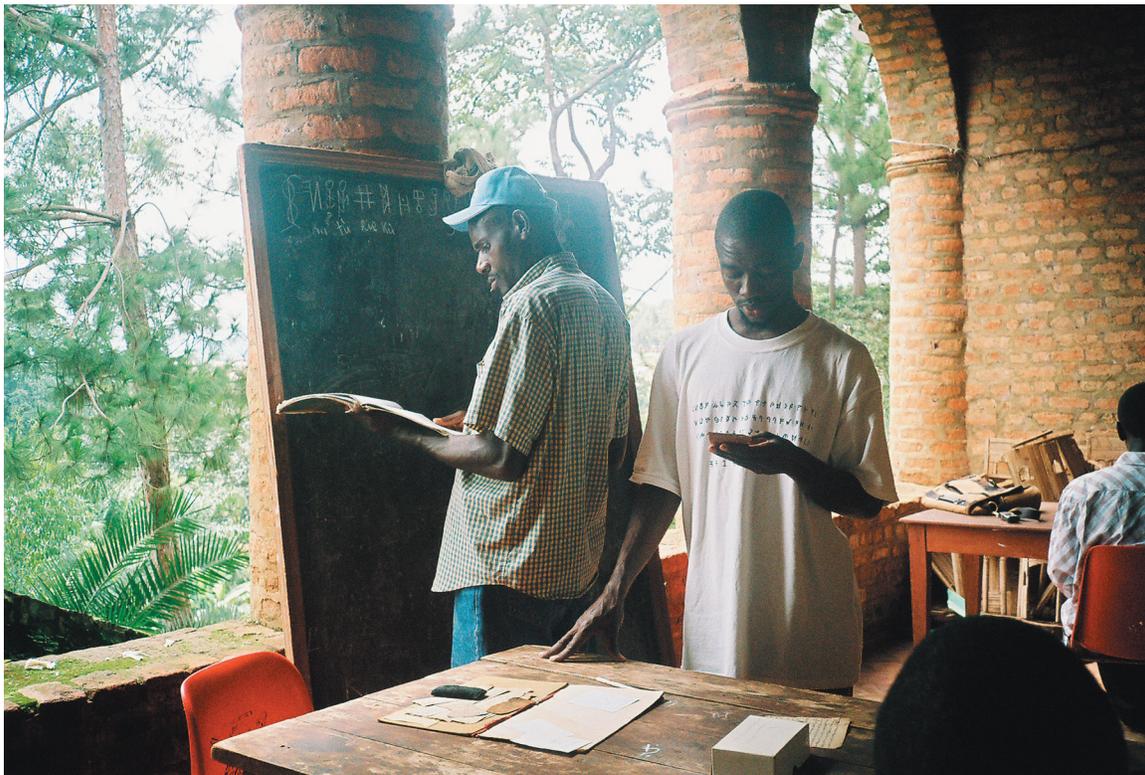
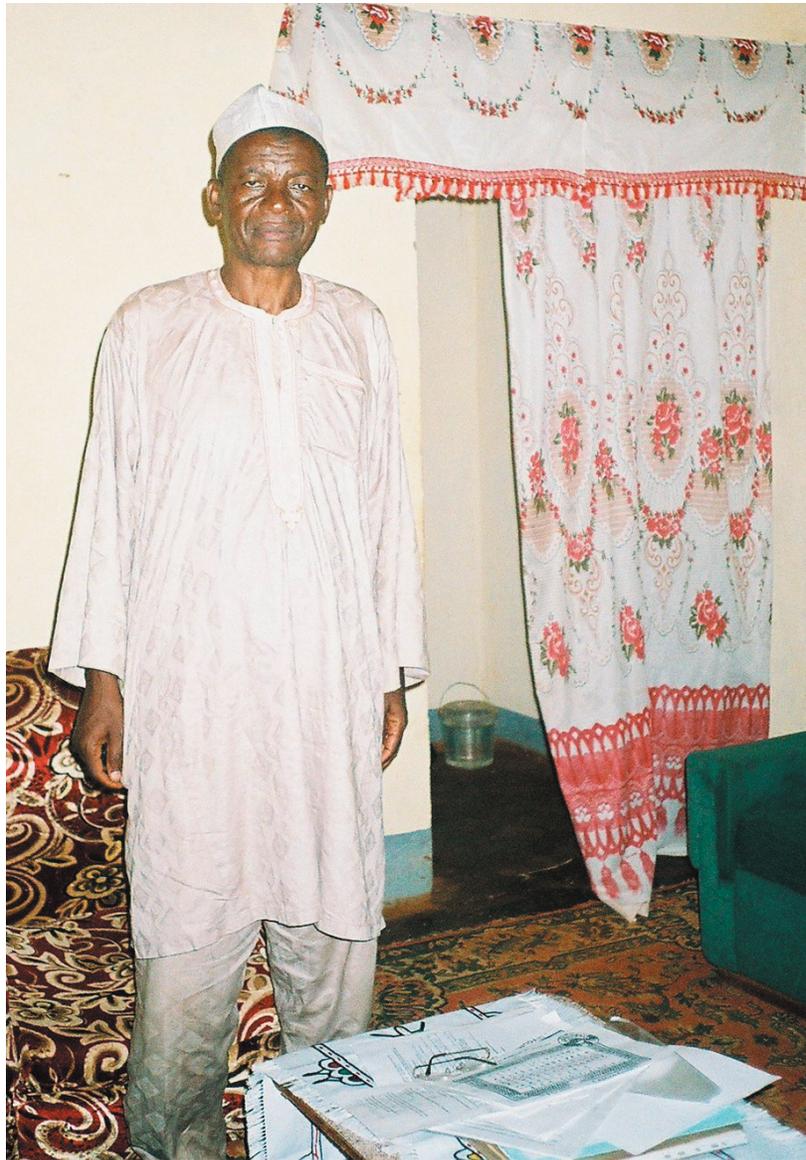


Fig. 2. Two members of the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project, Amadou and Abdoulaye, transcribing from a manuscript fragment.

Dr. Njiassé Aboubakar Njoya, a professor at the University of Yaoundé, was also extremely helpful in clarifying many of the semantic values identified by Dugast & Jeffreys, and in specifying meanings for terms that they had left unclear from their work.



*Fig. 3.* Dr. Njiassé Njoya. On the coffee table in front of him are pages from a manuscript in progress; proverbs written out in the Bamum script.

There are a number of works in progress that are making use of the Bamum script, including a manuscript of African proverbs collected from various sources by Njiassé and translated into Bamum. Zakari is intent on producing calendars using the Shūmom names for months and weeks. Abdoulaye Mbouombouo has composed a poem that has been posted here: <http://www.almaleh.com/es22-e.htm>, followed by a transcription in Latin script. They are grateful for the efforts that have been put forth to support computational awareness of their script.