



The African Anthropologist, Vol 16, Nos. 1&2, 2009, pp. 69-92
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(ISSN 1024-0969)

A Concise Historical Survey of the Bamum Dynasty and the Influence of Islam in Fouban, Cameroon, 1390 – Present

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Abstract

The Bamum (locally pronounced Pamom) are found in the Western Province of the Republic of Cameroon and occupy principally the Noun Division. The present Bamum population is composed of people from two different backgrounds. The dominant ones are the people of Sudanic origin who broke away from the Tikar, at Rifum and then moved southwards to Njimom, and finally to their present site of settlement. There are also those of Bamileke origin who were found living in the present-day Bamum country and who were conquered and partially assimilated by the Bamum invaders. Fouban,¹ the capital of the Bamum Kingdom, is without doubt the cultural showpiece of traditional civilisation in the Republic of Cameroon. Since its foundation, the Bamum Kingdom has gone through an excitingly creative evolution. Bamum is one of the rare African kingdoms to have invented an indigenous writing system of its own, as well as a printing press and a machine for grinding grain. With the advent of colonialism, Bamum was one of the kingdoms in Cameroon that collaborated closely with the German colonisers. In this way, the Bamum were permitted so much autonomy that the incidence of colonialism only slightly upset the traditional structure of the society until 1916 when the French replaced the Germans.

The prime objective of this article is to investigate how Islam changed the lifestyle of the Bamum. It also takes a close look at the activities of early Bamum kings, especially the outstanding

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achievements of Sultan Njoya and a detailed investigation into the influence of Islam in the Bamum Kingdom. The article argues strongly that Islam has influenced the political, economic, social, religious and cultural life of the Bamum.

Résumé

Les Bamum (mot localement prononcé Pamom) se trouvent dans la province occidentale de la République du Cameroun et occupent principalement le département du Noun. La population actuelle des Bamum se compose de peuples d'origines différentes. Les peuples dominants sont ceux d'origine soudanaise qui se sont séparés des Tikar à Rifum pour migrer vers le Sud à Njimom avant de s'établir finalement sur leur site d'implantation actuel. Il ya aussi les peuples d'origine Bamiléké qui vivaient dans l'actuel pays Bamum et qui ont été conquis et partiellement assimilés par les envahisseurs Bamum. Foumban, la capitale du Royaume du Bamum, est sans aucun doute la vitrine culturelle de la civilisation traditionnelle de la République du Cameroun. Depuis sa fondation, le Royaume du Bamum a connu une évolution d'une créativité passionnante. Par exemple, le Bamum est l'un des rares royaumes africains à avoir inventé un système d'écriture indigène qui lui est propre, ainsi qu'une imprimerie et un moulin à grains. Avec l'avènement du colonialisme, le Bamum fut l'un des royaumes camerounais qui ont collaboré étroitement avec les colonisateurs allemands. Ainsi, le Bamum s'est vu accorder tant d'autonomie que l'impact du colonialisme n'eut que très peu bouleversé la structure traditionnelle de la société jusqu'en 1916, lorsque les Français remplacèrent les Allemands.

L'objectif premier de cet article est d'étudier comment l'Islam a changé le mode de vie des Bamum. En outre, Il s'intéresse de près aux activités des premiers rois Bamum, aux réalisations exceptionnelles du sultan Njoya et procède à une étude approfondie sur l'influence de l'Islam dans le Royaume du Bamum. Cet article soutient fermement que l'Islam a influencé la vie politique, économique, sociale, religieuse et culturelle du Bamum.

Geographical Location and Historical Background of the Bamum

The Bamum Kingdom lies within its shrunken limits, enclosed by the rivers Mbam and Mape to the east and Noun to the west. It is situated between longitude 10° 30' to 11, east of the Greenwich Meridian and latitude 5° to 6 north of the equator (Njeuma 1973:249-265.3; Martin 1951:1-36). It is located in the Western Province of Cameroon. The kingdom occupies a total surface area of approximately 7,300 km (Njeuma 1973:249-265, Martin 1951:1-36,

Gumne et al. 1972:5). It is bounded on the north-west by Donga-Mantung and Bui Divisions, on the west by Mifi Division (Bafoussam), on the south by Bafia and Bangante and on the east by Banyo, in the Adamawa Province (Gumne et al 1972:5). In relation to topography, the kingdom comprises the Fouban highlands (plateaux) and the Malantouan and Magba lowlands, which have altitudes of 1,500 meters and 750 metres respectively (ibid). The climate comprises two seasons of uneven duration, namely, the long rainy season and short dry season. The Bamum Kingdom is a transitional zone that comprises both savannah and forest vegetation (Daouda 1992:13) due to the fact that it lies between the southern forest zone and the tropical savannah grassland of northern Cameroon. The kingdom has varied soil types that influence crop cultivation in the area, for instance, the Foubot region that has rich volcanic soil is the greatest food crop-producing community in the entire kingdom. The soil in Fouban is predominantly dark and sandy.

Perhaps the most famed and probably the largest of the Grassland kingdoms in Cameroon is Bamum (Yongetah and Brain 1974:41; Ngoh 1996:20). The Bamum Kingdom was founded in 1390 by Nchare, a prince from Rifum (present-day Bankim) (Greary and Njoya 1985:19; Dugast 1949:126; Fanso 1989:41) in the Tikar plain. The Bamum are therefore of Tikar² origin (before migrating to Kimi, the Tikar are believed by some scholars to have come from Bornu, a Sudanese kingdom around the Lake Chad Basin). Granted the fact that their founder, Nchare, was the son of a Tikar chief. The Bamum share the same ancestry with other ethnic groups such as the Nso', Bafut, Kom, Bum Fungom Ndop and Ntem (Niba 1986:16).³

Generally, the genesis of the Bamum Kingdom is attributed to the migration of three members of the Tikar royal house, namely Nchare, Ngunso and Morunta, who broke off from the main group at Rifim (Kimi) (Mohammadou 303) after the death of their chief. The desire to start new settlements away from the parent group provoked this move, but there is also the possible connection with the gradual southward migration of Tikar groups, such as the Chamba and Mbum, under pressure from the Jukun empire centred around Wukari on the river Benue. When Nchare, Ngunso and Morunta arrived in Mbam, they continued in different directions: Ngunso, the eldest who was a female, went westward and settled with her band of followers at Kovifem (Chilver and Kabbery 1970:249-257), Tavisa and finally at Kumbo headquarters of Nso in the present North-West Province of Cameroon. There, she founded the Nso Kingdom or State.⁴ Morunta continued north-east of the Mbam, settling at Nditam in the direction of Bafia. Nchare crossed the

Mbam and settled first at Njimom (Bah 1985:149)⁵ where he defeated the Bamileke who were there before, imposing his supremacy. At Njimom, he was recognised as king, taking over the attributes of the Tikar 'sacred' kingship (Njeuma 1973:253). Today, the Bamum settlement is no longer limited to Njimom, but covers the entire Noun Division. Population censuses carried out in the area show that the Bamum population has increased rapidly. For instance, the population of Bamum that was 70,000 (Binet 1952:399-415) inhabitants in 1952 had increased to 100,000 in 1974 (Eyongetah and Brain 1974:41). By 1982, the population had increased to 215,000 inhabitants (Neba 1999:70). In 1987, the population was 293,725 inhabitants (National Demographic Census 1987). The figures from the last national census carried out three years ago have not yet been published.

Nchare and his followers, with a long tradition of warfare, changed the way of life of the population immediately to the east of the River Mbam, from peaceful subsistence agriculture to war-oriented communities. The advantage the intruders had was the possession of iron weapons, for example, iron-tipped arrows, spears and lances. By a series of concerted military campaigns, Nchare overran the neighbouring villages until he came face to face with Mfomben, the most important chief in the region. He conquered Mfomben's capital, present-day Fouban, and consolidated his authority over the conquered villages (Njeuma 1973:253).

After settlement, the pivot of the Bamum traditional government was the king. Political activities centred around the palace and on the person of the king. The palace (which served as both the king's residence and office) was always crowded with titled officers and those who came to greet the king or simply to be current with the news. The exercise of political functions depended exclusively on services rendered to the king. Individual ability, wealth and birth were not criteria for office though they provided an initial advantage to many people (ibid:254).

On the death of Nchare, a new kingdom was founded consisting of several villages recognising the king at Fouban as overlord, to whom tribute was obligatory. The essential feature of the society, which changed only very slowly with the years, was that it was dominated by subsistence agriculture with farms situated near the dwellings. The early farms were worked according to a co-operative plan through organised teamwork. This system kept the entire population busy. Sometimes slaves, exclusively war captives, were used to supplement the labour force in the farms of notables or traditional titleholders. In the past (and even today) the Bamum's chief economic activity was farming, supplemented

with artisan work (Daouda 1992:15); for instance the weaving of cloth, baskets, mats, bags, caps and the carving of marks and pipes. The making of drums, gongs and pottery was often mixed with agricultural work since work on the farms was seasonal. In the past, the aim of producing these items was not solely commercial. Rather, they were produced for domestic consumption, for presents to the king, for the payment of bride-wealth, as well as for hospitality and other traditional obligations at communal festivals (Njeuma 1973:254). Concerning crop cultivation, the Bamum cultivated both cash and food crops. The dominant cash crops cultivated were cocoa and arabica coffee (Dubie 1940:9). The Bamum produced 395,898 tons of cocoa in 1939 (Region du Noun 1941), while in 1940, so much coffee was produced to the extent that approximately 1,800 tons were exported (Picco 1940:9).

Daily subsistence among the Bamum was based primarily on maize (*Zea mays*) (Geffrier 1941:5), introduced from the United States of America (USA) in the early 19th century (Tardits 1977:779) and cultivated as a subsidiary staple; but during the reigns of Nsangu (1863-1889) and Njoya (1889-1933) as the kings⁶ of Bamum, it diffused extensively until in the 1950s and early 1960s, it progressively replaced sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) which had been the predominant staple. Nowadays, maize is the major staple of the Bamum (Nemkam 1981:11). The two main varieties cultivated were dent maize (*Var. indentata*) and flour maize (*Var. amylacea*). The flour type was introduced in the 1920s by Bamum traders from northern Cameroon much later than the dent type (Tardits 1983:1-28).

Some Early Bamum Kings

Although tradition recounts nineteen kings since the Bamum kingdom was founded, generally speaking, Bamum history rests on the achievements of four reigns: Nchare, the founder of the kingdom and the ruling dynasty; Mbwombwo, the tenth king; Nguwo, a slave who served as Mbwombwo's chief councillor for war, the fourteenth king; and finally, the indomitable Sultan Njoya. These four reigns are key to the history of Bamum. They best illustrate the civilising influence of African rulers in politics and commerce, diplomacy and in the organisation and consolidation of empire.

Physically, Nchare was a short man with a protuberant stomach. He was dark in complexion, had short limbs, but was very courageous. He loved dancing and drinking palm wine. He is said to have been very charitable (Njoya 1977:11). He was succeeded by one of his daughters, since he had no surviving son. The lady and others who succeeded him ruled for several years, and fought wars with other groups until they

captured Mfomben. The general feeling was that by the conquest of Mfomben, too much had already been achieved and further wars were unnecessary. This feeling lingered on until the tenth king, Mbwombwo. Recent tradition explains the extraordinary personality of Mbwombwo (Njeuma 1973:254).

Mbwombwo was a very determined man with giant body features (Bah no date:10). He believed in action. He is said to have been very tall, and had red eyes, broad nostrils and large ears. He also had a long neck, a broad chest and back, and long arms. He was as courageous as a lion, cruel, but very generous (Mveng 1976:139). Until today, no Bamum king has physically resembled him. Mbwombwo kept his people perpetually under military preparedness. Even agriculture became subordinated to military pursuits.

During the reigns of Mbwombwo's immediate predecessors, Kuoto and possibly Ngulume, Bamum was subjected to two types of raid: raiders with firearms who came from the west, and Fulani slave raiders on horseback from the north. Long-distance raiding or conquest was not only possible, but rewarding to the stronger party. More so, the type of arms a people used finally decided their victory. As a consequence Mbwombwo concentrated almost all the kingdom's efforts on the production of efficient weapons. Every able-bodied man in the kingdom had to be armed as a defensive measure against raiding bands, and later as a means of enlarging the kingdom. According to Mbwombwo, empire building was the universal preoccupation of strong rulers who became distinguished by the nature and quality of arms at their disposal (Njeuma 1973:255).

Practically every village had at least one forge for manufacturing various kinds of iron weapons for fighting. Ownership of forges became the hallmark of wealth and true nobility. Mbwombwo's expeditions to the north across the Mape to the foothills of the Mambilla mountains, and west to Bansa and Oku, were motivated by the desire to dominate the source of iron (ibid). With the increase production of iron weapons, Bamum expanded her frontiers rapidly under Mbwombwo. Another reason that accounts for the military success of the Bamum was surprise attack (Bah 1985:11). The majority of the conquered people who had specialized skills were displaced and resettled along the Fouban-Foumbot axis. War captives were generally not always enslaved but given land to settle and live like freemen.

Further still, during the reign of Mbwombwo, the king stood as the unrivalled head of the society. The wars fought during his reign were considered to be the king's wars and those who engaged in the fighting

considered themselves as being in the personal service of the king. The contrast in Mbwombwo's reign was the simultaneous pursuit of long-distance wars on the one hand and commerce on the other. The military expeditions exposed the Bamum to commercial opportunities. Commerce went hand in hand with war. By 1804, the revolt of Uthman Dan Fodio against the Hausa rulers had created a large political as well as an economic centre to the north of the Bamum Kingdom. The empire had been inspired by Fulani religious renaissance, but those who exploited the commercial possibilities were the Hausa. In those early days, the Bamum traded principally with the Nso', Kom, Bum, Meta and Takum (Bah 1985:566, Njeuma 1973:256).

The Hausas came to the south-east in large numbers with the establishment of Muslim regimes in Muri and Adamamwa, north of the Bamum Kingdom. They traded in the nineteenth century to satisfy two separate and distinct markets: the European-oriented markets of the coastal city-states, in such articles as ivory and slaves; and also the subsistence economies of the savannah kingdoms, for example, Bornu and the Hausa states, in slaves, tobacco, palm oil and kolanuts. Kolanuts were particularly in high demand as a stimulant in the Hausa states before and after the Fulani upheavals. The Hausa exchanged Bamum products for iron ore, cloth and salt. With the successes in Mbwombwo's wars, and the resultant sudden upsurge in the Fouban population, many of the aristocracy, including the king, started indulging in financing long-distance trade, primarily to obtain iron ore.

The impact of Mbwombwo's dynamic leadership was also felt in the internal development of the state. This was predominantly in two spheres: in the extension of court etiquette and in the granting of privileges to the king's close collaborators and members of the royal family. The distance between the king and the people became wider than ever. The king designated his successor from among his children. The functions of the '*Kom*' who, strictly speaking, were the king-makers degenerated to simply implementing the wishes of the king. New titles of nobility (for example, *Nji*), were introduced for those rewarded by the king for rendering special services or for those responsible for one or other of the multifarious duties which suddenly came into existence. Mbwombwo's reign was that of prosperity for the Bamum (Njeuma 1973:257).

Mbwombwo was succeeded by his son, Gbethnkom, who could not provide order and cohesion in the kingdom as his father had, probably due to the vastness of the kingdom. The monarchy passed through a phase of instability, marked by palace revolutions and assassinations of kings. Nguwo, one-time Mbwombwo's minister of war, seized power

and ruled as an uncrowned king. He relaxed on the war front and concentrated more on domestic affairs. He was the first Bamum king to order his people to turn their interest solely towards agriculture. Except for border problems with Nso, he did not attempt to extend the frontiers of the kingdom beyond what he had inherited.⁷

Nguwo reigned for over forty years. At the end of his reign, more dynastic instability broke out. Ngoungoure, the last surviving son of Mbwombwo, had the opportunity to rule for just thirty minutes due to his assassination. One of Mbwombwo's grandsons also ruled for a while, but did nothing worth noting. When Nsangou took over the throne, he achieved unity by reconciling and integrating his rivals into important positions in his administration. He deliberately exterminated those that he could not integrate. He died on an expedition against the Nso around 1888. However, the Bamum king whose rule most influenced the life of the Bamum people was Sultan Njoya.

Sultan Njoya and his Outstanding Achievements

After the death of Nsangou in 1888, Njoya became king at a tender age. His mother assumed regency (Ngoh 1996:21) under the general supervision of Bentkom. Njoya's mother, Nsabndunke, died on 2 July 1913, after which Bentkom attempted to dethrone Njoya, but did not succeed as Njoya sought the assistance of the Lamido of Banyo. During Njoya's reign, several Muslim scholars from Banyo settled in Fouban where they constructed a mosque and opened an Islamic school where many Bamum were taught how to read and write Arabic (Martin 1951:6). During the reign of Njoya, the Europeans who visited the Kingdom of Bamum appreciated the high level of culture and civilisation that reigned. European missionaries and officials frequented and settled in Fouban. They admired Njoya as a great king and Njoya in turn admired the ability of the Europeans and Muslim scholars to read and write. This contributed to his invention of a particular writing, the Bamum script – *Sho-Mum*.

With the help of palace stewards and councillors, Njoya invented the *Sho-Mum* (Binet 1852:399). This writing was composed of signs and symbols from actions and ideas. The script was later on reduced to 510 letters and 83 signs, ten of which were numbers. The invention of the script led to the creation of schools in the palace. Courtiers were taught in these schools, how to read and write the Bamum language. Following the invention of the script, the Bamum were able to codify their laws and customs in a single book, titled, *History, Laws and Customs of the Bamum*. Learned scholars of the script documented the history of the Bamum (ibid:22).

Njoya is also noted for the construction of the magnificent palace of Foumban (Mveng 1976:138). Today, the palace serves not only as a monument to the ingenuity of the Bamum but also as a tourist attraction. Njoya personally supervised local crafts. He encouraged bronze work, woodcarving and weaving. This was intended to promote the people's image and to encourage cultural development within the kingdom. King Njoya was the first among the Bamum kings to become Islamised and he took the Muslim title of Sultan. Under his supervision, a museum was opened in the Foumban palace where works of art were preserved. Some of the works are still there until this day. Sultan Njoya also invented a hulling mill⁸ for the grinding of cereals. His reign came to an abrupt end because he was against the French colonial policy of assimilation. The French dethroned and exiled him to Yaounde where he died in 1933 (Ngoh 1996:22). El Hadji Seidou Njimoluh Njoya, who ruled from 1933 to 1992 succeeded him. Today, the Sultan or King of Bamum is Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya who has been ruling since 1992. Islam is the dominant religion in Foumban, and thus has greatly influenced the life of the Bamum.

Islam in Foumban and its Influence

Islam was introduced in Foumban during the reign of King Njoya in c.1910 (Dugast 1949:127). King Njoya accepted Islam because it advocated the acquisition of more than one wife, a practice that Catholicism and Protestantism which were initially introduced in the area protested against strongly. The Catholic and Protestant clergymen had advised the king and his traditional title holders to divorce their numerous wives and remain with a single wife per man. Another reason that prompted King Njoya to accept Islam was the desire to extend the frontiers of his kingdom. In the year that Islam was introduced in Foumban, the Lamido of Banyo, the nearest lamidat to Foumban left the following Marabouts in Foumban and charged them with the responsibility of converting the Bamum – Malam Jidah, Malam Aboubakar, Malam El-Hadj, Malam Babam, Malam Adamu and Malam Jijniwauam (Aboubakar 1981:61). The Islamic faith that these Islamic scholars spread in the Bamum Kingdom played a preponderant role in transforming the society politically, economically, socially, religiously and culturally.

In the economic domain, Islam played an important role, especially in the communication system. Prior to the introduction of Islam in Foumban, the entire communication system in the area was the same as in the entire Western Grassfields – purely rudimentary in nature – before the beginning of missionaries' activities in the region (Funteh 2003:39). The indigenous pattern of communicating with one another included the use

of the traditional gong, an instrument used to summon people by the chief or king and the local dialect. The olive plant known in the area as *Nkeng* was mostly used as a medium of communication between and among chiefs, both in times of trouble and peace, or to invite any important personality the chief wanted to talk with. Strongmen and women did the transportation of goods for commercial purposes on foot because footpaths were the most reliable form of roads (ibid:40). Before the introduction of Islam, everybody in Foumban walked on foot, no matter the purpose and distance, except the king who was carried on a traditional stretcher by four strong men. When King Njoya became Islamised and visited his counterpart, the Lamido of Banyo, he saw the donkeys that existed there and brought some to Foumban, which were reared and used for the transportation of luggage. The donkey also replaced the men who used to carry the king because King Njoya felt that carrying him was a form of slavery and because the Holy Koran forbids slavery, he was obliged to abolish that inhumane practice. However, some critics in the area are of the opinion that King Njoya stopped people from carrying him not because he intended to abolish slavery, but because he had acquired the donkeys from Banyo. These critics strongly believe that if the donkey was not available in the Bamum Kingdom, then the Bamum would have continued to carry their king as the custom had been. Islam did not only contribute to the introduction of the donkey in Foumban, but also greatly influenced the entire Bamum trade network.

Before 1910, trade in the Bamum Kingdom was perceived and transacted from a purely small-scale perspective and mostly by barter. At times, cowry shells, glass beads, brass coils and some shaped pieces of flat iron (called shovels) used strictly in marriage and trade transactions, represented the measure of value in the existing exchange system (ibid). The most prominent items of exchange were locally manufactured salt, maize, palm oil and palm wine. Slaves were also indispensable items of this small-scale trade. The stages of slavery have significantly changed in the area. First, before 1910, all the Bamum who were not from the royal lineage were slaves to the members of the royal lineage. A member of the royal lineage could kill a non-royal lineage member, seize his property and the matter would not be tried in any court. Second, all the traditional titleholders from the palace who were involved in the first external slavery did it with Europeans via barter. Humans were exchanged for shoes, salt, mirror, clothes, whisky and European-manufactured guns.⁹ Third, after 1910, the early Islamised Bamum sold the Christians and the other non-Muslims into slavery.¹⁰ Furthermore,

prior to the introduction of Islam in the region, the Bamum exchanged the palm oil that they produced *en masse* for the palm wine that their neighbouring Bamileke produced in huge quantities. However, after the introduction of Islam in Foumban, the Bamum stopped the trade in palm wine because the Holy Koran forbids Muslims from consuming alcoholic drinks.

The pilgrimage to Oumrha, Saudi Arabia also played a great role in trade transactions in the Bamum country. During the pilgrimage, Bamum Muslim merchants purchased such goods as Islamic rosary, perfumes, female wrappers, and male gowns and caps, and in turn sold them in Foumban. Before the introduction of Islam in the region, such trade transactions did not occur. Moreso, Bamum scholars who were awarded scholarships in Islamic studies to pursue their studies in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and other Middle East countries sent the money they earned in these countries back to the Bamum Kingdom where it helped to boost the Bamum local economy.¹¹ Before the introduction of Islam among the Bamum, no Bamum had such an award. The local manufacturing of different works of art for domestic usage and also as items of trade was a practice of antiquity among the Bamum.

Just as the case was with most of the Western Grassfield chiefdoms, the Bamum sought every means of remaining self-reliant in what concerned locally manufactured artisan items. They gave ample opportunity for the development of local industries such as weaving, pottery and blacksmithing. As concerns the art of carving, there existed many centres and experts. The carving experts involved themselves in the production of secret objects such as statutes. They also produced musical instruments such as the short flutes and xylophones in different forms. The pottery industry too greatly flourished in the area. Experts in this domain manufactured high quality artistic pottery that was later used for trading with other chiefdoms. Most pottery was made out of clay. The clay was churned and pounded so that it became sticky and so used for the production of shaped containers such as vases, pipes and pots (used in cooking food, tapping of palm wine and as storage utensils) (Funteh 2003:38). Almost all the adult males and females in the society carried out weaving. The men mostly weaved mats and bags from raffia palm fibres. They also produced caps from cotton and feathers. The women, on their part, concentrated on the weaving of baskets. To realise good products, the weavers used knives and cutlasses that were locally produced by the Bamum smiths.

Blacksmithing constituted an important activity among the Bamum. Bamum blacksmiths were famous in the production of broad-leaved jingle spears (that until this day are held by the Bamum chiefs and members of secret societies), shovels, cutlasses, knives, axes and hoes (ibid). The Bamum themselves also invented a grinding mill. Islam has attempted to influence the Bamum manufacturing industry, but has achieved very little. For instance, the first Imams in the area advised the Bamum to halt the carving of statues and turn entirely to agriculture, but the Bamum refused and argued that carving was a lucrative occupation. Until this day, a large proportion of the Bamum Muslim population continues to carve and sell statues as middlemen. Although the Bamum were manufacturers of short flutes, the technique of the manufacture of these flutes did not diffuse in the area before the introduction of Islam. The technique was introduced in the Bamum Kingdom by the Fulani Muslims from Northern Cameroon. These flutes were blown solely when the Sultan was on tour and the sound they produced meant, honour to the king.¹²

However, it is not only the economic life of the Bamum that was affected by Islam. Their social life too was affected tremendously. Marriage was an important social institution in the Bamum pre-Islamic period. Two kinds of marriage contracts, monogamy and polygyny, popularly referred to as polygamy in Cameroon, existed in the area. As is the case in many African traditional societies, polygyny – the legal marriage of one man to two or more women concurrently (Funteh 2003:63) – remained popular, especially among influential individuals such as chiefs, traditional titleholders and wealthy men of the age. During the pre-Islamic period, a grown-up boy's father chose his son's wife while the family head of the girl's family behaved alike. The age of marriage for the female was not an important factor. All the beautiful women in the society belonged to the king. They were caught compulsorily and taken to the palace. Those fortunate fellows whose daughters got married to the king were highly protected in the society. There was also no limit to the number of wives that an individual could get married to at a given time. Wife inheritance was also a common practice in the area, especially in the king's palace and with village chiefs.

During the pre-Islamic period, the bride wealth requirements that the son-in-law gave his father-in-law included fathoms of cloth, kitchen utensils (pots, spoons and knives), shovels, food of different varieties, goats, kolanuts, palm wine and some cowries. All these requirements amounted to about 200,000 F CFA. Before marriage was contracted in

those early days, the girls were expected to be virgins. The royal family alone was privileged to bring up its wives from the age of six to maturity.¹³ Islam greatly influenced Bamum marriage customs. For instance, Islam advocates the liberty of the woman. Due to Islamic doctrine, Bamum women now choose their husbands. This is a sharp contrast to the pre-Islamic situation whereby husbands were imposed on women by the women's parents. Although Islam permits polygyny, the number of wives is limited to four and all the wives should be loved equally by their husbands. Islam has also influenced the Bamum bride wealth requirements. After its introduction, about two cutlasses, two hoes, a few dresses and approximate 12,000 F CFA has sufficed for bride wealth. The father of the young woman in some cases even builds a house for his son-in-law. All that the father of the woman wants is the happiness of his daughter in her matrimonial home. A devoted Muslim father-in-law would ask his son-in-law if he is a Muslim. If he is a Muslim, the father-in-law gives him the Holy Koran, a mat for praying and a rosary. This is a recent development in the Bamum Kingdom. In fact, the marriage institution has always been the place where a sound educational foundation is laid in the Bamum Kingdom.

Education was principally informal in nature before the introduction of Islam in Fomban. There existed a popular belief, which according to Firth, was that: For any society to be able to withstand the passing of time and its challenges, the elders have to teach the young the know-how of their socio-cultural, economic and political activities (Firth 1953:49). The type of education or teaching, which was given to the children in their early childhood in the Bamum Kingdom as well as in other traditional societies of Cameroon, was by their mothers, baby-sitters (brothers and sisters) and their fathers (Funteh 2003:68). This is how pre-colonial traditional education in Cameroon as a whole operated. Nevertheless, most skills were acquired by watching elders and beginning to act in like manner. The mothers went along with girl children when engaged in their socio-economic responsibilities. This was the forum for teaching them how to perfectly undertake female-related duties, especially the task of future leadership both in the family and in the community (ibid).

Part of the informal education was also in the hands of experts in basic skills. In most, if not all the Western Grassfield chiefdoms, vocational training like blacksmithing, traditional healing, priesthood, thatching, carving, pottery, and weaving was in the hands of experts. Parents entrusted their children to the professionals (in the case where the parents

themselves did not do these activities) who trained them in groups and individually. The introduction of Islam in Foumban greatly modified this informal education also.

The type of education introduced via Islam was formal in nature. This was through the introduction of a Koranic school in the region that laid emphasis on reading and writing. The first Koranic school was opened in Foumban during the reign of Sultan Njoya (Aboubakar 1981:246). The language of instruction used in the school was Arab. The three prominent Islamic scholars (marabouts) who taught in the school were El Hadji Ibrahim Njifekuop, El Hadji Aboubakar Sina and El Hadj Admau Ntiche (ibid:247). The duration of course remained largely indeterminate. The didactic materials used were very simple, the main ones being the wooden arm board and a feather (*Al-Calami*). In addition to the teaching of Arab, the language used by Muslims to pray to God (Allah), the girls who attended the school were also taught to be future obedient housewives, and in effect, the Koranic school produced obedient and submissive housewives (ibid:246). A tuition fee was either paid in cash or kind to the marabouts, depending upon their wish. The pupils offered their instructors gifts that consisted of a cock, a tin of maize or any other food item available, while their parents paid small sums of money (peanuts). This was a stark contrast of the pre-Islamic situation in which the experts who taught children weaving and other crafts were not paid in any form and did not receive gifts.

As Islam influenced Bamum pre-colonial education so too it influenced its judiciary. The implementation of law, order and justice was the sole responsibility of the traditional council, headed by the king. The secret society known as *Ha-toumiah* executed the decision arrived at by the traditional council. Offences were classed into minor and major. Minor offences included disobedience to the chief, refusal to perform communal labour in the quarter or palace, fighting and refusal to settle a debt. Major cases included murder, rape, adultery, witchcraft and aggravated theft. The traditional council handled all these offences. The aim of the council was to foster solidarity and harmony amongst the Bamum. During the pre-Islamic period, the punishment for committing adultery with the king's wife or that of a village chief was murder while adultery with the wife of a non-title holder was subjected to a huge fine of several goats. Nowadays, although Islam does not permit adultery, according to Bamum Muslims, it also does not permit the murder of the adulterer. In this regard, the Bamum Muslims are in total contrast with the Islamic *sharia* law, which stipulates that any woman who is guilty of adultery

should be stoned to death. The Holy Koran strongly forbids murder and the judgement of man by a fellow man. The Muslims, therefore, introduced a new code of justice in the land. The Bamum Muslims were, and even today, advised to take the Holy Koran as their only source of reference in providing a long-lasting divine solution to all problems. Judgement and punishment of the defaulters to them was God's duty and not that of man.¹⁴ Before the introduction of Islam, all the Bamum believed in the existence of several gods.

Although the Bamum practised polytheism, they however believed that one of the gods was supreme. They believed that the particular supreme God was invisible, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He was believed to be the creator of the sky, earth, water and everything found therein (Funteh 2003:70). He was also believed to operate through the other gods of the land such as the god of the mountain, sun, stone and hills. Ancestral worship was a common feature in their traditional belief system. All the Bamum poured libation with palm wine and palm oil. Palm oil libation signified fight or blood while palm wine libation was directed to the spirits. The Bamum believed that the world would come to an abrupt end one day through the submersion of the earth.

Following the introduction of Islam in the Bamum Kingdom, the Bamum traditional belief system changed slightly, although some Bamum Muslims still believe in the existence of several smaller gods.¹⁵ Islam strongly forbids the pouring of libations. Bamum Muslims also have a different view towards the end of the world. There is, however, a remarkable difference between the views of Muslim literates and Muslim illiterates. The Muslim literates believe that the world comes to an end to a particular individual when he or she dies and not that there will ever be outright world destruction. On the contrary, elderly Bamum Muslim illiterates believe that the entire world is gradually coming to an end due to the social ills that currently prevail in Foumban such as oral sex, homosexuality, prostitution, nude pictures, women attending school, women holding posts of responsibility in the government, wife beating and women commanding their husbands.¹⁶

Turning to the cultural sphere, the Bamum traditional birth and death ceremonies and the activities surrounding them were also affected by the Islamic faith. The reaction of the people of the Western Grassfields (the Bamum inclusive) to the birth of a child into the society was an event of great importance.¹⁷ It was an occasion for great jubilation and feasting.¹⁸ Whenever a Bamum woman was pregnant, the entire family was happy, and on the day she started labour, a traditional birth

attendant or a traditional midwife attended to her. Happiness filled the hearts of the family concerned when the child emitted its first cry. The mother was immediately washed with warm water and ate a heavy scrumptious meal. After any successful birth, the father of the child organised a small feast that was attended by all the members of the child's maternal and paternal family.¹⁹ The custom in Fouban and in many parts of the Western Grassfields provided that during the feast any person who learnt of the birth and happened to be returning from tapping palm wine, immediately surrendered the wine (no matter the quantity and purpose) to the family in question, for it was believed that palm wine was good for a breastfeeding mother as it increased the flow of her breast milk.

In fact, after childbirth, the woman was prohibited from doing any hard work for a period of about three months. If it was her first child, she was respected, pampered and kept in absolute confinement for a period of about five months. The naming of the child accompanied the joy of birth. The Bamum were very conscious of the implication of names. They named children in relation to certain local philosophies in the region. It was the responsibility of the maternal and paternal grandparents of the child to give its name but priority was given to the paternal grandfather. Some indigenous Bamum names include Chandinli, which means think of the last day, Mpahtouahnkaine, which means you will suffer and Mouchili, which means a child without a name.

However, since Islam was introduced in the area, no taper surrenders his palm wine to the family of a new born baby because the kingdom today is dominated by Muslims (it is estimated that 80% of the Bamum are Muslims, 8% protestants, 4% Catholics and 7% animists)²⁰ who no longer drink palm wine. Women no longer give birth at home as the case was during the pre-Islamic period. Some hospitals have been built in the region through Islamic aid. There was even an orphanage that trained young orphans on various petty trades. This orphanage was financed by Kuwait. But after the attack on the American Pentagon on 11 September 2001, Kuwait ceased financing the orphanage because the Cameroon Government insisted that aid from Muslim-dominated countries must pass through it before reaching wherever it was directed to. Islam also led to the introduction of new names among the Bamum such as Ibrahim, Soule, Adamu, Aboubakar, Seidou, Muhammad and others.

During the pre-Islamic period, when death occurred, the corpse was washed by old women²¹ and buried with some herbs in the mouth and some tied in the palms. However, the burial of a king was different. After

digging his grave, his corpse was placed on the feet of at least four able-living men.²² Nowadays, Islam forbids the burying of corpses with herbs in the mouth and palms. Through the Islamic influence, Sultan Njoya forbade the burying of a king with living people because he considered the practice to be a form of slavery. There is a small degree of burial segregation in the area. Although the Muslims bury Christians and animists, the Bamum Muslims who have long beard, referred to as a *Wahab*²³ do not bury the non-Muslims.²⁴ Islam introduced this burial segregation because before its introduction, all the Bamum buried their fellow countrymen.

Furthermore, before the introduction of Islam in Foumban, all the Bamum were pork eaters. But today Bamum Muslims no longer eat pork because the Holy Koran strongly forbids Muslims from consuming it. Bamum Muslims respect the taboo because they believe that the pig is a dirty animal, hence unfit to be eaten by a Muslim who is a clean person.²⁵ Muslims also believe that pork consumption defiles them.

Perhaps the most visible impact of Islam in Foumban is on the dressing pattern of the people. Before the introduction of Islam, dressing was not a complex issue in the region. Women and men wore a loincloth, wrapped round the buttocks and chest, while the children below the ages of 10 put on virtually nothing. The unprivileged men and women wore small cotton strips of cloth, which covered only their genitals. The rich men appeared at the dancing ground with special loincloths made of many strips of cotton woven locally. This was the prevailing situation in the Bamum kingdom and in many parts of the Western Grassfields.²⁶ Prestigious men put on an iron necklace, blue and white porcelain beads and brass rings on their fingers. Prestigious women on their part put cowry shells in their hair, and on their wrists and ankles.²⁷ However, when Islam was introduced, the early Muslim Hausa merchants from Northern Nigeria who contributed enormously to spreading Islam in the Bamum country introduced and imposed modern wrappers for the women, and caps and long gowns that fell to the ankles or knees for the men. These Nigerian Hausa merchants, who were themselves the sellers of these Muslim-fashioned dresses, imposed the idea in the area that if the Bamum Muslims did not wear these foreign dresses, then Allah (God) would not take their prayer seriously.²⁸

Before the introduction of Islam, shrines were the sole places of worship in the Bamum Kingdom. This was the sacred place where different gods were worshipped. Following the acceptance of Islam by the Bamum, the Muslims introduced the traditional Muslim Mosque in the region. Today, the mosque is the most conspicuous place of worship in the entire region.

Islamic influence has also been felt in the political domain. Before the introduction of Islam, at the head of the political organisation was found the king. He was the owner of the land and the commander of the entire Bamum populace. The Muslims introduced the title of Sultan that the king bears today.²⁹ Because the title Sultan is limited to the commander of the Muslim faithful, some Bamum prefer to refer to the Sultan as King-Sultan of the Bamum. This is a recent appellation in the area that has emanated from the introduction of Islam in the region.

Summary

Each human being is surely governed by certain beliefs or laws. Some of the beliefs or laws, if not all, are obtained from religious standpoints, for instance, from Judaism, Buddhism, Jehovah Witness, African traditional belief systems, Christianity or Islam. Islam – the religion we have discussed – has played a major role in transforming behavioural patterns in the world. Similarly, it has transformed behavioural patterns in Fouban. However, it is not only the behaviour of the Bamum that has changed. The religion has influenced the area politically, economically and socio-culturally. In the economic sphere, Islam helped in the introduction of the donkey in the region. Before the introduction of the donkey via the Islamic inspiration of Sultan Njoya, the Bamum themselves carried their kings from the Bamum country to wherever he intended to go. The introduction of the donkey did not only aid in the transportation of the king to wherever he went, but also helped in the transportation of economic commodities. This greatly reduced the burden of the Bamum. Still in the economic sphere, the Muslims introduced new manufacturing techniques in the region. The introduction of these new manufacturing techniques provided more employment opportunities for the Bamum.

Prior to the penetration of Islam in the Bamum Kingdom, the Bamum social life was woven in with many social institutions, namely, education, religion and marriage. The marriage institution, in particular, was infested with a lot of tenets. Monogamy and polygyny were practised, but the later remained very popular among the influential individuals due to the socio-economic benefits they derived from it. The pre-Islamic education was informal in nature, but Islam introduced the formal type. The early Muslims introduced formal education in the area through Koranic schools where the first Bamum were taught how to read and write. This was a positive consequence, as it paved the way for the pursuit of Western education in the area. The introduction of formal education in the kingdom was in fact, a gradual step to the eradication of illiteracy that plagued the region. The Bamum religion was characterised by

polytheistic features. With the introduction of Islam, many innovations were made regarding the social life of the people. In relation to marriage, although Islam advocated polygyny, it limited the number of wives that a Muslim could marry to four. Muslims introduced modern long gowns that fall to the knee and round caps of different colours. The wearing of such long gowns enabled the Bamum Muslims to appear in uniformity with the other Muslims of Northern Cameroon. If the Bamum are living a modern life today and integrating with ease in modern Cameroon society, it is thanks to the Islamic faith.

Notes

1. Otherwise stated in this paper, Fomine will not only stand for the capital of the Bamum Kingdom, it will designate the total area that is inhabited by the Bamum. The same area is also henceforth referred to as the Bamum Kingdom.
2. The term Tikar was popularised by the British Administration and applied to those populations of the east and central Bamenda Grassfields whose dynasties claimed an origin from the region of the Upper Mbam River and its tributaries. Some of these populations describe their place of origin as 'Tikari', some as 'Ndobu' and some as 'Kimi' or Rifum - Kimi being the modern Tikar chief of Bankim or Kimi and Rifum its lakeside coronation site. The term Ndobu, at least at the early part of the 20th century, referred to the area lying North of Bamum and South of Banyo. The name in the form of Mundop was applied by the immigrant Kimi dynasty from Mbum to the people among whom it settled, the Ndop Administrative Area in the Bamenda Grassfields acquired its name after the first British Assessment in 1925 because of some dynastic claims to Ndobu origin. Among the later should also be included the Bafut, Kom and Bambili dynasties. It may be significant that the dynasties which specifically claim Ndobu origin and do not mention Kimi or Rifum are in Central and South Bamenda; the papiakum dynasty (and those of some Bamileke chiefdoms such as Bagam and Bangante) claim Rifum origins, as do those of Nso, Ntem and the Tikar hamlets on the Banyo border. For more elaboration of the term Tikar and more groups that claim origin to it, and some puzzling things about these claims, see E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kabbery, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields* (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), p.23.
3. Mathias Livinus Niba, "Nationalism in the Southern Cameroons, 1939-1959 (Ph.D. thesis, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 1986), p. 16. These peoples share a common political system of centralised monarchies backed up by ubiquitous secret societies.

4. What used to be the Nso state, of which the Fondom of Nso was the core, is today represented by the Bui Division of the North West Province of Cameroon. It is 2,300 square kilometres in area. In 1953, it had a population of over 50,000 inhabitants, according to the colonial census of that year. In 1971, the population of the same area was estimated at 105,000. The 1976 national census of Cameroon put the population of Bui Division at about 142,000. Today's estimates put it at 200,000. The state of Nso was a composite polity. It comprised the Nso Fondom (Kingdom), the core and founder of the state. The capital of the Division Kimbo (Kumbo), also the capital of the Nso Fondom is located at the centre of both. It has the Nto' (palace), the headquarters of some of the important associations, the main market, and a large residential population. Beyond the capital in all directions, there are very many villages of Nso proper. These villages are made up of patrilines and patrilineages. Except for the Won nto' or royal clan. The Nso clan is not an exogamous unit, and members are dispersed throughout a number of villages. The exogamous localised unit is the patrilineage, a number of whose male members occupy a single compound controlled by a lineage head having the title Shuufaay, Faay or Sheey (lordling). For a further description of Nso state, see Bongfen Chem-Langhee, *The Shuufaayship of Professor Bernard Nsoyika Fonlon* (Yaounde: CEPER, 1989), pp.6-30.
5. Thierno Mouctar Bah, "Guerre Pouvoir et Société dans L'Afrique Pre-Coloniale (Entre Le Lac Tchad et La Cote du Cameroun)" (Ph. D. thesis, University of Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne, 1985), p.149. Njimom is the place where the Bamum as a people under Nchare leadership assumed a separate political identity. As an ancient capital, Njimom has until today remained a spiritual centre of the Bamum.
6. In order of succession, the kings who have ruled the Bamum Kingdom are Nchare Yen 1394-1418, Ngouopou 1418-1461, Monjou 1461-1498, Mengap 1498-1519, Ngouh1 1519-1544, Fifen 1544-1568, Ngouh11 1568-1590, Ngapna 1590-1629, Ngouloure 1629-1672, Nouotou 1672-1757, Mbwombwo 1757-1814, Gbethnkom 1814-1817, Mbiekouo 1817-1818, Ngouhouo 1818-1863, Ngoungoure 30 minutes, Nsangou 1863-1889, Njoya Ibrahim 1889-1933, El Hadj Seidou 1933-1992 and Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya 1992-present.
7. Interview with Adama Mande, housewife, aged 60 years, Koutaba, 22 October 2007.
8. Personal observation of the hulling mill at the palace of the Sultan of Fouban. During mouth swabs samples collection in Fouban, Loveline Lum, Veeremah Krishna and I had the opportunity to visit the Fouban palace where we were shown the old hulling mill that sultan Njoya invented and the bones of the war victims who were killed during the Mbwombwo's wars, the wars that extended the frontiers of the Bamum Kingdom.

9. Interview with Mouchili Ibrahim, researcher, aged 33 years, Foumban, 7 October 2007.
10. According to the Bamum Muslims, selling the non-Muslims into slavery was but normal as they considered the non-Muslims to be infidels and Pagans. Selling them into slavery was therefore not a sin.
11. Interview with Ibrahim.
12. Interview with Ibrahim.
13. Interview with Mohammad Ayiatou, farmer, aged 60 years, Malantouan, 17 October 2007.
14. Interview with Zacharie Sangou, aged 55 years, farmer, Koutaba, 11 September 2007.
15. Interview with Alidou, trader, aged 64 years, Foumban, 13 October 2007.
16. Interview with Ibrahim.
17. It was and still is considered an event of great importance because the baby is believed to bring luck into the family where it is born.
18. Robin Horton, "Ritual Man in Africa," *Africa* 34 (April 1964): 85-96.
19. Funteh, "Pre-colonial Society," p. 101.
20. Aboubakar, "L'Islam en pays Bamum," p.233.
21. The Bamum believe that the water that is used to wash a corpse is very poisonous and as such, young women who often have quick temper are prevented from washing corpses because of fear that they can use the water to poison people.
22. The Bamum believed that the living men were to continue serving the king as servants in the world where his soul went.
23. Wahab was a devoted Muslim from Saudi Arabia who propounded the Islamic doctrine (Sunnite), that Islam should be practiced just the same way as Muhammad the founder did. The wives of the Muslims who practice this doctrine dress always on black and cover all parts of their bodies except the eyes.
24. Interview with Benjamin Lebuoh, farmer, aged 66 years, Foumban, 23 October 2007.
25. All the Bamum Muslim informants shared this opinion.
26. Funteh, "Pre-colonial Society," p.110.
27. Interview with Adamam Mande, housewife, aged 60 years, Koutaba, 22 October 2007.
28. *ibid.*
29. Interview with Emmanuel Mboumbouo, herbalist, aged 50 years, Yaounde, 17 October 2007.

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