

# CONTRIBUTION OF KING NJOYA TO BAMOUN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE THROUGH " SHUMON " WRITING

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## RESUME

The invention of the "Shumon" script by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya (1886-1933) in which he wrote and taught the culture of the Bamoun people remains a landmark in the history of cultural development. Thanks to Shumon, King Njoya's research discoveries were preserved till our time. During the 100th Celebration of the life of King Njoya in 1996, Professor Daniel Noni Lantum, the "National Coordinator of the Census of Traditional Healers of Cameroon" presented the list of Tradipractitioners who were probably King Njoya's students and examined their current heritage and contribution to African Traditional Medicine. This paper is the original analysis

**Key Words:** Sultan Ibrahim Njoya, "Shumon", Culture, African Traditional Medicine, Medicinal Plants, Traditional Healers

## ABSTRACT

La découverte d'une écriture appelée " Shumon " par le Roi Ibrahim Njoya (1886-1933) par laquelle il avait écrit son livre " Zut Fuli Bok... " qui portait la culture du peuple " Bamoun " reste toujours une contribution remarquable dans l'histoire de développement culturelle africaine. Grace a ce livre il avait bien gardé ses découvertes de la recherche sur la médecine traditionnelle africaine jusqu'a nos jours. Pendant la célébration de la centenaire du Sultan Ibrahim Njoya en 1996, le Coordinateur National du Recensement des tradipratitiens (nes) du Cameroun, Professeur Daniel Noni Lantum, a présenté un discours sur une liste des Tradipratitiens (nés) entre 1911 et 1933 et qui étaient probablement les élèves de le Roi Ibrahim Njoya et il à aussi fait une analyse profonde de leur contribution à la pratique courante de la Médecine Traditionnelle au Cameroun. Nous voici le document de cette analyse.

**Mots Clés:** Roi Ibrahim Njoya, "Shumon", Culture, Médecine Traditionnelle Africaine, Plantes Médicinales, Guérisseurs

## INTRODUCTION

If King Njoya was held as truly great in his own time (1886-1933) and even today in our own time, it is particularly because he knew and profoundly understood his people; his spirit was part of theirs, and he was thus able to inspire them and analyse their creative genius in a wide range of fields to pacify this spirit as well as to build a Kingdom which was first of all mystical before being impressionably physical and artistic. He was a keen observer of the nature around him, yet a great philosopher thanks to his profound intuition and preoccupation with the problems of life in his community. Among the several professional groups and artisans whom he assembled together from time to time to philosophise and to study their specific knowledge domains and art were Tradipractitioners of health with whom he discussed the problems of life, illness and health, and human misery; and how to combat them and avoid precocious death.

An important part of the armamentarium of this combat being medicinal plants, he consecrated a lot of his attention to their cultivation and harvest, and further documented his knowledge of them thanks to his invention of an original script called "Shumon". According to Lantum (1985), "The lively Sultan intellectual, warrior, botanist, traditional healer, writer, etc proceeded to make an inventory of medicinal plants and their local applications in the grassland regions of Adamawa Plateau, stretching from Nde Division, across Noun to Adamawa district of Banyo and even beyond. He documented these medicinal plants in a script of his own invention and taught both the art of writing and the use of plants to his people"

By his objective observation, codification, and documentation for perenity, Sultan Njoya moved out boldly from empiricism into the practice of science and then institutionalized his knowledge for posterity. But unfortunately, as "Shumon" remains till today a local secret code and art for a very limited privileged school and linguistic region, the rich and precious knowledge of King Njoya was denied to the grandeur of universality until very recently when it was translated into French between 1981 and 1986. It is this translation and the actual works of several Bamoun Traditional Healers, some of whom still survive today or whose parents belonged to King Njoya's School of Indigenous Bamoun Medicine, that we will examine in some detail contributions of Sultan Njoya to medicine, as well as the significance of "Shumon" as the means of preserving this knowledge of the power of plants for future generations and for mankind.

This paper will first of all review the census of Bamoun

Medicine-men, many of who were contemporaries of Sultan Njoya. After that, we will study some of their professional activities, including the diseases which they treat, their principal therapeutic processes and their contributions to modern Primary Health Care System. From there, we will draw a synthesis and conclude on the contributions of Sultan Njoya to Bamoun medicine in particular and to universal medicine in general.

## II. BAMOUN MEDICINE - CULTURAL HERITAGE

Although we wish to spotlight the contributions of a great man to culture in general and to Traditional Medicine in particular, it is important to emphasize that Traditional Medicine is an integral part of a people's cultural heritage, and that in spite of the eminence of some distinguished healers in an ethnic culture, these eminentiae are principally guardians of the heritage since they, first of all, are inheritors and apprentices of the knowledge of their predecessors and contemporaries even if, by special gift and inspiration, they themselves are inventors of some new aspects or profound interpreters of the status quo. Thus the medicine of King Ibrahim Njoya's time was the accumulation of medicinal know-how and wisdom which spanned the Bamoun dynasty from the time of Nchare-Yen since 1394, and even earlier when the root origins were simply Tikari Medicine (which still thrives today and still is widely shared among the Bamoun, the Nso, the Mbam and other ethnic entities found in the Western Plateau grassfields).

The contributions of Sultan Njoya who was raised in this ecology and was inspired by it must be seen as one of valourization, recognition, collection, deepening, documentation, institutionalization, scientification and promotion to new heights for the better service of mankind. So, like all great men, sent to illuminate society, King Njoya was anxious to tidy up what was already there, enrich it, preserve it well by the "Shumon" script so that future generations will be able to construct their society on the past with this epoch as a reference. His unpublished volume of 1900 titled "Zut Fuli Bok" was translated into Modern Bamoun, then into French by Njifutie Njikam, Nji Mama Njoya, Nji Fifen Nkeundap and Ndayou Emmanuel in 1990.

As time and resources did not permit us to investigate Traditional Medicine profoundly as it existed and was practiced before King Ibrahim Njoya's time, we were however able to collect information on how it was after him and even during his reign, from those few octogenarians who saw him and studied at his feet

when still children. It is they who have carried the crusade to our day, and it is they who gave us a fair and clearer idea of what King Njoya did to **institutionalize Traditional** Medicine in Bamoun country. It was therefore our special honour and pleasure to cooperate with some of them to revive the Traditional Medicine Clinic of the Sultan's Palace in Fouban, and the one in Mantoum - where still thrives the herbal gardens which Sultan Njoya planted with his own hands in a particularly favourable ecological setting around his Island holiday resort.

Let us now study the characteristics of the generation of Tradipractitioners who survived King Ibrahim Njoya.

### III. CENSUS OF BAMOUN TRADITIONAL HEALERS

In 1986 we carried out a Census of Traditional Medicine Practitioners of Noun Division with a view to identifying those who knew King Njoya personally and who were most probably exposed directly to his teachings in the Palace School of Traditional Medicine.

Table I: Traditional Healers of Bamoun Country –Born between 1910 and 1923

N°	Name and Village or District of Residence	Year of Birth	Age by 1996 (years)
1.	Mutunji Dauda of Koutoupit	1910	86
2.	Pefakoue Ousmanou of Kuomenke	1913	83
3.	El Hadj Mbouombou Adamou of Mankoukou	1914	82
4.	Nji Mouensie Issah of Njintout	1916	80
5.	Ndam Emboue Daouda of Malentuen	1917	79
6.	Nji Njingah Soule of Kounga	1918	79
7.	Ndam Idrissou Njimbom II – Foubam	1918	78
8.	Ngapout Moussa of Magba, Quartier NJikwala	1918	78
9.	Ghatoumgouh Amadou, Chef de Village Pondimoun	1919	77
10.	Pepouere Ousmanou of Koundja - Koutaba	1920	76
11.	Yende Ousmanou of Koucham Kap	1920	76
12.	Gnignipoure Amidou of Magba	1920	76
13.	Moungnutou Ousmanou of Matagmon –Malentouen	1920	76
14.	Foundap Mjingoutane of Fouban	1920	76
15.	Nji Mboubouo Ousmanou of Baigom, Foubot	1920	76
16.	Nessoudom Issah of Massangam s/c Chef Ngaya Adamou	1921	75
17.	Monta Moussa of Njinka s/c BP 50 Fouban	1921	75
18.	Mokoumie Motoubouo Saidou off Banggambi	1921	75
19.	Mfouapon Ibrahim of Matoupou s/c Chef Nji Molium M.A.	1923	73
20.	Ngoumpengoum Aboubakar of Foubot, BP 110 Foubot	1923	73
21.	Njoya Nsangou Soulemanou of Baigom, BP 189 Fouban	1923	73
22.	Ejbetnkom Aliyu of Baigom	1924	72
23.	Lukong Wirdzerem Aliyu of Kutupit	1924	72

In general, we considered that these healers must have been born before 1923 so that the youngest of them was about 10 years, when King Njoya died in 1933. We found the following still alive:

It is important to note that although in Bamoun all mothers of children, especially the elderly women, do practice a certain minimum of Traditional Medicine as an essential part of their up-bringing and socialization, no lady's name featured in the above list of 23 who were probably scholars at the feet of King Njoya. However, among those of the generation which followed them and were born between 1924-1940, within the same strong aura of

Table II: Prominent Traditional Healers of Bamoun, born between 1924 - 1944

N°	Name and Address	Date of Birth	Age (years)
24.	Nketnchout Amadou of Malentuen – Fouban	1926	70
25	Renekane Mousa of Mantoum, BP 23 Malentuen	2927	69
26	Mouansie Abdou of Baigom	1927	69
27.	Gnangou Aliyou of Koutie, Koutaba	1927	69
28	Nchoncho Amadou of Kourmelap, Fouban	1929	67
29	Mme Gbiepit Ramatou of Mapare – Koutaba	1930	66
30	Ngoungoue Ibrahim of Pondimoun – Koutaba	1930	66
31	Nchange Choualibou of Baigom, Foubot	1930	66
32	Mbvee Oumarou of Koutoupit	1930	66
33	Mbohhou Abdou of Bafole – Fouban	1931	65
34	Mbuh Isofa of Kagnam - Fouban	1933	63
35	Nsangou Aboubakar of Manka – Fouban	1934	62
36 *	Mme Mapon Aminatou of Njintout s/c chief of Njintou	1935	61
37 *	Mme Nchoundoungam Esther of Foubot s/c Eglise Evangelique	1935	61
38 *	Mme Bongben Paulina of Koutoupit (of Nso origin)	1936	60
39	Baba Ibrahim, BP. Magba	1937	59
40	Nsangou Ali of Quartier Matam, Masagam	1937	59
41	Gbetnkom Abdou of Fontain I, Fouban	1937	59
42	Nfoyeti Moninou of Malouré – Fouban	1938	58
43	Lukong George of Koutoupit (of Nso origin)	1939	57
44	Ndassa Amadou of Baigom	1940	56
45	Pouyouana Mama of Pondimoun, Koutaba	1940	56
46	Ntendap Adamou of Malentouen Centre	1940	56
47	Mfikele Shatu of Koutoupit (of Nso orgin)	1940	56

King Njoya, the names of the distinguished Mme Gbiepit Ramatou of Mapare-Koutaba, Mme Napon Aminatou of Njintout and Mme Nchoundoungam Esther of Foubot do figure prominently.

More recently, up-dates on resident prominent healers of Bamoun put them at more than 200, but several healers of Bamoun origin are found on the Census lists conducted in Nde, Wouri, Mfoundi and Ngoketunja Divisions. There are also middle aged and younger ones who are still practicing in Noun Division

Table III: Middle Aged and Young Resident Tradipractitioners of Noun Division in 1996

N°	Name and Address	Date of Birth	Age (years)
48	Muepene Ibranhim of Bangourain	1941	55
49	Mme Ntang Jenabou of Koutoupit	1941	55
50	Mouchingam Yaouba of Njehah – Foubot	1945	51
51	Moutapmbene Oumarou of Mbantou, Foubot	1946	50
52	Moutapmbene Mama of Fossett – Foubot	1947	49
53	Chin Ousseni of Foubot (of Nso origin)	1941	55
54	Changou dit Chat Amidou of Njimbot I	1948	48
55	Panchet Choualbou of Bangourain	1948	47
56	Nfouakouet Issah of Konja – Koutaba	1949	47
57	Njomouo Martin of Batchingo, Bangante BP 37 Foubot	1949	44
58	Tankeu Jean-Pierre de Bamendjo –Mbouda BP 36 Foubot	1949	66
99	Njankouo Mohamed of Douala, BP 51 Foubot	1951	45
60	Mbvee Oumarou of Koutoupit	1930	66
61	El Hadji Njoya Seidou of Baigom s/c BP 46 Foubot	1954	42
62	Foupouagini Salifou at Pondimoun – Koutaba	1960	36
63	Mme Mogoum Christine of Mougoum, Foubot	1959	37
64	Ngouwouo Oumarou of Foubot, Qtier Company BP 51 Foubot	1960	36
65	Takam Gabriel of Kwetnu, s/c Foubot	1962	34
66	Djiponak Omyon Aboubakar of Malentuen	1977	19
67	Lukong George of Koutoupit	1937	59
68	Lanjo Gamkong of Koutoupit Centre de Guerisseurs	1939	57

Excluding N° 66 and 67, these resident middle aged and young healers range from 17 years to 55 years. Among them we find healers of Nso and Bamileke origin residing in frontier villages. Females are still on the scarce side with only one (N° 48) presenting. Perhaps what is pleasantly striking is the age spread, with almost every age represented. This shows a positive sign for continuity. The majority are moslems, with only a few Christians. The new perspectives of religious pluralism and other ethnic groups can only enrich the traditional medicine of Bamoun.

But what is more relevant is that the knowledge left behind by King Njoya is being handed down from one generation to the next without interruption. It would not be superfluous to complete this census with the list of the "Fon a Nguon" who assemble every two years to bring medicines and to give advice to their King in Fouban.

#### IV. CONTENT OF BAMOUN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The purpose of Bamoun Traditional Medicine is to pacify the troubled spirit, protect the personality, heal sickness, promote total well-being, and to cause a balance between the human being and his total environment. The approach is therefore holistic covering a vast and complex constellation that is the Bamoun personality. (Lamaré Mare Mongbet 1975).

In consequence, since the time of King Njoya, they recognized a wide range of professional skills groups, which, though overlapping, are still discernable:

- Fortune Telling, Sooth-Sayers and Diviners,
- Traditional Birth Attendants,
- Bone setters and Fracture Treatment managers,
- Fetishists,
- Psychiatrists and Psychotherapists
- Herbalists who treat common ailments with plant elements (leaves, stems, roots barks, flowers, fruits)
- Protectors of people against poison
- Specialists in managing witchcraft.

Marc Mongbet Lamaré (1975) in his anthropological study titled: "La Médecine Bamoun" has analysed the various patterns of skill contributions in detail and pointed out to the wide scope of integration of these patterns in common practice.

The common diseases or identifiable illness syndromes commonly treated with a fair measure of success would include:

- Epilepsy
- Madness and personality disorders
- Fractures of the limb
- Management of pregnancy and labour

- Fevers especially malaria
- Wounds and ulcers - fresh and chronic
- Symptomatic treatment of some jaundice cases
- Diarrhoeas and dysentery
- Gastritis and Peptic Ulcer syndromes
- Boils and abscesses
- Some snake bites
- Joint pains
- Menstrual problems
- Urethritis
- Headaches
- Infertility
- Insomnia
- Night mare
- Poisoning
- Burns
- Scabies
- Worms
- Tooth aches

But, the treatment of fractures by Bamoun healers is by far the most established and acceptable in **modern times**. Monthe (1981) reported on the extensive self-evacuation of patients from modern hospitals in Bafoussam to seek treatment with Tradipractitioners of Massagam in Noun.

Because of the holistic approach to therapy, the diagnostic process for chronic conditions can be laborious and complex, involving prolonged consultation with family members, divinatory practices and therapeutic trials. But the common practices at the clinic of the Traditional healer would be the screening process which determines whether or not the patient will recover; in other words, the probability of cure or satisfactory palliative treatment. For this, several types of oracles or devices are in common use:

The use of cowries for divination (in combination of 3,5,7),

The throwing of marked stones

The use of the speaking mat

The use of feathered tops in combination of 5,7 and 9,

The reading of images in water,

The reading of the pendulum,

The casting of lots

The consultation of the earth spider (Ngambe, Ngam, Ngami)

Apart from plants, the Bamoun healers use Water, Honey, Palm-wine, Earth, Stones, Clay, Animal Parts, including Snakes, Monkeys and Birds, Insects, Air and Spirit force.

## V. CHALLENGES OF KING NJOYA

To master all these techniques required long periods of apprenticeship at the feet of experts, and this is an area where "writing" and codification technology was necessary to facilitate the storage of knowledge for learning in school. King Njoya is reported to have been an expert in this art which is reported to have been well elaborated in his Occultic or diplomatic version of the "Shumon" Writing titled: Zut Fuli Bok.

Whereas the knowledge of Botany for plant identification is an integral part of herbalism, it is not itself enough for someone to become a professional practitioner of Traditional Medicine. It is important and essential that the student must first of all know the pharmacological properties of these plants and be able to classify them rapidly and broadly into those which are poisonous and injurious to man on the one hand, and those which are non-poisonous and edible on the other.

Further, the student must learn how to apply these plants in the various therapeutic processes to improve the health and general well-being of man. In actual traditional medicine practices, medicinal plants are often used in combination in the form of prepared drugs. This is another area where the secret of the Science and Art of medicine lies, and this secret imposes on the future practitioners to learn through apprenticeship the various recipes and methods of drug preparation.

Further more, the problem of dosage determination for various categories of patients (the young, the old, the very sick, pregnant women, patients on some other therapeutic regimes, etc) of course this cannot be learnt by pure imagination without serious risk, and quite often the healer must demonstrate and taste the drug in front of the patient.

Perhaps what is even more complex is the ability to diagnose the common diseases which occur in society. The process requires the training of one's senses and the actual practices of observing several cases - by participant - observation in apprentice status - to attain mastery. For many disease conditions the healer must watch, touch, smell and hear the patient; some manipulation and observation of elements coming out of the patient are additional, and the reactions to first-line therapy are important diagnostic points.

How to determine that the patient is improving or deteriorating, or that he is now well, or that he has in fact died, requires professional knowledge and skills, even if at first sight, it looks like common-sense. Certainly there is need for all healers to spend a lot of time to learn all these before they can be deemed qualified for final initiation and installation by senior and proven healers, to set up on their own.

These were the challenges that King Njoya recognized in the professional practice of Traditional Bamoun Medicine, took his time to organize the extant knowledge, carried out further research, and finally wrote much of it down in his "Shumon" writings for posterity.

## VI. Synthesis and Conclusion

During this celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the birth of Sultan Ibrahim Njoya (1886-1933) we must find some time to reflect and derive profit from the generous and magnanimous spirit of the man who came in his time, saw misery and problems among his people of Bamoun, took conscience and did his best to improve the lot of these people in several fields, including the professional practices of indigenous medicine. It is to his credit that what he left behind him was by far more than what he found.

But King Njoya did not solve all problems in medicine, for problems are always there as part of human life and existence. He invented a Script "Shumon", documented what was then known, and created a school to teach the rising generations on the knowledge and wisdom of their fathers so that the future shall be better than the past.

Now that in our days, Traditional Medicine has finally been officially recognized and integrated into the Primary Health Care System, it is time to dig up the works of King Njoya, use them in health personnel training schools in order to fulfill the King's noble intentions, and thus pay him a fitting homage.

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