

**THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE: MEMORY OF THE WORLD**  
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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Africa has a rich and unique oral, documentary, musical and artistic heritage to offer to the world, however, most of this heritage was burned down or captured during the wars of the scramble for Africa, and what had survived by accident was later intentionally destroyed or discontinued during the whole period of colonialism. In spite of this, the Memory of the World Register has so far enlisted 158 inscriptions from all over the world, out of which only 12 come from 8 African countries<sup>2</sup>. Hope was restored when on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2008, the Africa Regional Committee for Memory of the World was formed in Tshwane, South Africa. This paper will attempt to explore the reasons for the apathy from the African continent, within the framework of definitions and criteria for inscribing into the register. It will illustrate the breakdown and historical amnesia of memory and remembrance of the African heritage within the context of colonialism and its processes that have determined what was considered worth remembering as archives of enduring value, and what should be forgotten deliberately or accidentally. The paper argues that the independent African societies emerging from the colonial regimes have to make a conscious effort to revive their lost cultural values and identity.

**2. A CASE STUDY: THE RECORDS OF BAMUM**

African had a rich heritage, well documented and well curated long before the Europeans came to colonise Africa. Although much of this heritage was destroyed during colonialism, some of it has survived enabling the post colonial Africa to retrace, recover and reclaim some of its past heritage. To illustrate the African perspective, I would use an example from the Bamum Kingdom in the Cameroon, West Africa.

The Kingdom of Bamum had a very rich cultural and historical heritage and this had been documented in sculpture, architectural and textile designs and written records dating back to pre-colonial time. As from 1895, Sultan Ibrahim Njoya<sup>3</sup>, King of the Bamum Kingdom developed a phonetic script for the Bamum language, which was his mother tongue and the language spoken by his people. According to oral sources, Sultan Njoya got hold of a book which was written in Arabic script during his youth, and this inspired him to invent his own script and develop his language into a written language.

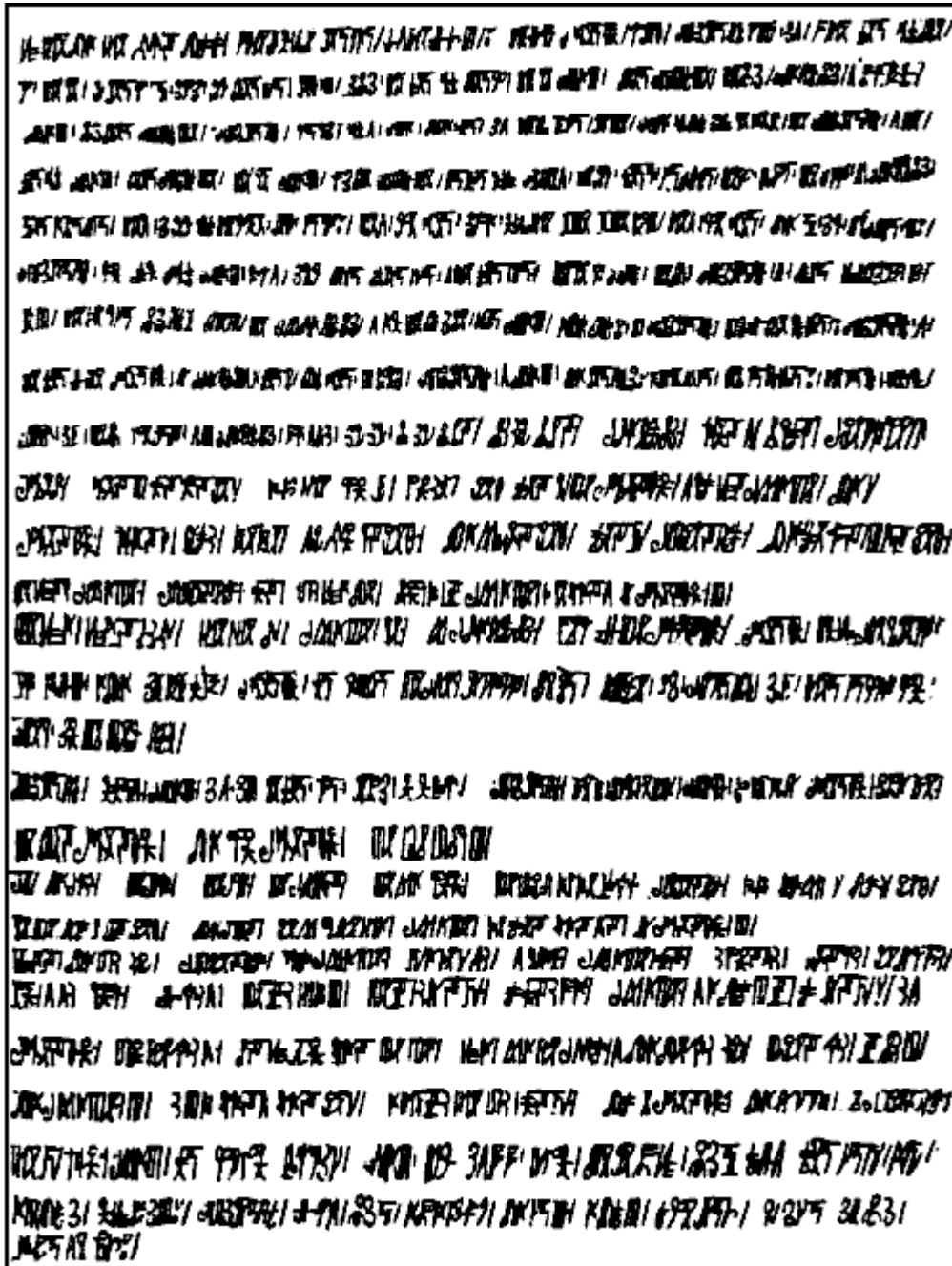
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<sup>2</sup> Benin, Ethiopia, Mauritius, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania, and Nigeria (in waiting)

<sup>3</sup> Sultan Njoya was born in 1876 and became King at the age of 15 years

King Njoya was inspired by a dream to create an original form of writing for his people. He solicited help from his subjects, inviting them to contribute symbols for his alphabet. The first version of Bamum script contained more than 400 pictographic and ideographic characters. King Njoya continued to revise the script, and by 1903 he had reduced it to the phonetic syllabary of about 80 signs.<sup>4</sup>



Example of Bamum script<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/bamum.html>, accessed 2008/01/16

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.proel.org/alfabetos/bamun.html>, accessed 2008/01/19

King Njoya kept records of his kingdom and established schools to encourage literacy in the Bamum script and had teachers trained. He had established a library where he had the history of his kingdom and the reigns of Bamum kings written. The library had loose leaves kept in embroidered leather bags telling the history of the Bamum Kingdom and reign of Bamum kings. King Njoya surveyed his kingdom and made a map of it. He had a printing press developed by the Bamum artisans. The traditional Bamum corpus consists of many hundreds of manuscripts, chiefly of history texts, treatises on traditional medicine, local cartography, personal correspondence, and illustrated folktales.<sup>6</sup>

In 1902, Bamum fell under the German colony Cameroon and King Njoya tried pragmatic strategies with the colonial power in order to maintain some autonomy for his kingdom. This strategy enabled him to continue pursuing the development of literacy, art production at the palace and architectural innovations in his kingdom. He encouraged the development of traditional weaving and dyeing.<sup>7</sup>

Germany lost all its colonies as a result of World War I, and Bamum came under the French rule. The colonial response to Njoya's innovations ranged between paternalistic curiosity to open hostility. While many artworks and some examples of the script were carried off to European museums, the independent technological and cultural development was not allowed to continue. In the end, the French colonialists destroyed Njoya's schools, and forbade the teaching of the script, which fell into rapid decline.<sup>8</sup> They also suppressed the printing press. The French perceived Njoya as a German ally and a threat. In 1924, they stripped him of his powers. Seven years later, they exiled him to Yaoundé, the capital city, where he died.<sup>9</sup>

Njoya is remembered as a reformer, an innovator, a patron of the arts, and the author and editor of one of the most unusual works of African historiography, a detailed chronicle of the Bamum Kingdom. Today, his memory is being revived in Bamum, and efforts are made to teach and write the Bamum script as a unique heritage. The Archives of the Bamum Palace at Foumban with its director Nji Oumarou Nchare is preserving and collecting documents and is involved in the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project, which also again teaches the script to the youth.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> International Standards Organization, ISO/IEC JTC1/SC2/WG2, N3209R, L2/07-024R, 2007-03-21

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/JPN-bamoum.html>, accessed 2008/01/19

<sup>8</sup> <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/bamum.html>, accessed 2008/01/16

<sup>9</sup> Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara/ed. John Middleton. Vol.3. New York 1997

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bamumscript.org/nchare.php>, accessed 2008/01/19



(Photo: Konrad Tuchscherer)

### 3. MEMORY OF THE WORLD AND AFRICA

I have used the story of the Bamum Kingdom in Cameroon in order to tell a tale of the African perspective and to make the world understand some of the challenges Africa is facing to re-create its past which was suppressed, ignored, lost and forgotten through forces of colonialism and global politics. The Kingdom of Bamum is an excellent example of a unique development of writing in pre-colonial Africa, done in a spirit of African collectivism to suit the Bamum language and without taking over or adapting an existing system. Unfortunately, the example of the Bamum people is rarely known outside Cameroon. There are a few scholarly treatises on the script, mostly written in obscure and hard-to-find journals, and a French translation of Njoya's History of the Bamum Kingdom, long out of print. You will not find King Njoya in the Encyclopedia Britannica. We as Africans do not learn about this brilliant example of African innovation and scholarship, and I did come across it by sheer accident. Most of the search results I found on the internet are due to the rather recent local revival of interest.

The case of the Bamum Kingdom clearly demonstrates that when Africans were in charge of their own destiny, they invented, innovated, initiated and preserved in both tangible and intangible format their spiritual, social and economic values and culture of their people. The colonial authority forbade the teaching of the Bamum script and instead they introduced formal schooling where the Africans must learn and study the French language, the French culture, the French history and became French by language, culture and identity in line with the policy of assimilation or acculturation. The colonial systems came along with Christian missionaries that again helped to erode the spiritual, ritual, traditional belief systems and legendary tradition of the Africans. Also, adults did not talk to their children about culture, history or politics out of fear of making them too radical and get them prosecuted by colonialists. Not surprisingly, many Africans are foreigners to their own heritage.

After independence, the people who knew about how to read and write in the Bamum script were dead or extremely old, the young ones that took over the government were educated and socialised as French, even though Africans by skin colour. These may be some of the reasons why some of our independent leaders took over from colonialism and adopted a leadership style similar to that used by colonialists.

When Africans took over after independence, they inherited and maintained a structure that was created by colonialism and the local communities that maintained some forms of traditional life styles remained outside the sphere of government. What Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o termed "decolonizing the mind", did not happen. How children that went to school in French would be expected to read a text in Bamum language even if they speak that language orally, how do they appreciate the values of the Bamum documentary heritage to enable them to nominate it for inscription to the Memory of the World Register? What do you expect from the products of a school where the children were punished if they were overheard speaking their mother tongue amongst each other, as it happened in some elite schools in Africa long after independence. They might think first of nominating the diaries of David Livingstone. This is also evident from some of the African inscriptions on the Register, which would rather nominate colonial records for inscription instead of digging and finding the original African heritage.

The children of assimilation grew up believing in the superiority of the European achievements and values they learnt at school, and now the UNESCO's Programme of the Memory of the World requires of them to nominate their cast-aside heritage for enlisting in the register. I think we need to work hard, to decolonise the minds of the Africans, to help them understand themselves and the processes of apartheid and colonialism that produced them. What are we asking these people to do, what should they nominate? Colonialism has systematically destroyed the heritage of Africa, some of the most unique and valuable assets of Africa were exported to the seats of colonial powers: such as the throne of the Bamum Kingdom, since 1908 in the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin, where next to the Benin bronzes it belongs to the most admired objects. If the Bamum people of Africa wished to nominate this throne how can they nominate something they no longer own and which is outside their custody, even if it was originally part of their cultural and historical heritage?

### 3.1 AFRICAN MUSIC

Let us look at another area of memory of the world. It is generally accepted that Africa has a rich heritage of music and dance. Slavery has brought this heritage to other continents, and it has greatly contributed to the musical richness of the Americas. So, it seems most appropriate to look for African musical heritage to be added to the Memory of the World Register. But where would we find recorded collections that would fit the criteria? Apart from the *International Library of African Music*<sup>11</sup> based on the work of Hugh Tracey in Grahamstown, South Africa, we will hardly find them in Africa; we would have to go to Washington with the Smithsonian Institution, or to Vienna with the Phonogrammarchiv. In my motherland, Namibia, we had one documentary item listed in the Register, the Hendrik Witbooi Papers, but I am ashamed to tell you that not a single public institution is tasked with the collection and preservation of our musical heritage; not even the current published musical production is collected systematically. South Africa has to be commended for establishing, in 2000, a national indigenous music programme to collect, preserve, and make accessible the country's valuable musical heritage.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ilam.ru.ac.za/>

### 3.2 INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

I have cited the development of a local script for an African language, but admittedly, this is rather an exception. Oral communication as a means of transmitting knowledge and culture is still a predominant mode of communication for the vast majority on the African continent. Oral communication is one of the reasons for the phenomenal spread of cellphone technology throughout Africa. But while oral communication is alive, the chain of spreading knowledge from the elders to the young in this medium is being broken by many factors. Radio, television, urbanisation and formal schooling are the main culprits, because they are mass media equalising culture and knowledge in a one-way manner, having little regard for the diversity of human language and cultural expression. The human interaction is mediated by technology or by imposed curricula and syllabi, and the cultural richness which evolved over centuries fall victim to the world-wide dominance of the English language, and North American cultural expressions – ironically, some of them with distant roots in Africa.

The Memory of the World Programme has to take these forces into consideration to achieve its goal of safeguarding memory of the people of the world and reflects the diversity of peoples, languages, and cultures. It is good and worthwhile to preserve outstanding cultural achievements which are fixed on physical media such as paper. But it is not enough. Unless we make conscious efforts to save the unrecorded memory, it will be erased just like a magnetic tape can be erased. There is anecdotal evidence that oral history cassettes, recorded at great effort and cost, sometimes get lost because the kids in the house use them to tape the current Top Ten pop music over it. In a wider sense, this is exactly what is happening now, every minute the world over, but especially in Africa. The forces of cultural imperialism are often more destructive than the brute force of the colonial military or the missionaries who burned the sculptures of the ancestors, which were called idolatry. The young people listen to the radio and to the rap music and not the traditional story telling and singing by the elders. Even if the rap is getting localised and Africanised, it is sung in a different context and with a different content. The young people know little about their culture and identity.

I am aware that serious efforts have been made, in a number of African countries, to establish oral history programmes, and also to record other cultural expressions. However, these are often accidental, uncoordinated, and donor-driven. What is often lacking is a systematic approach to the diversity of our cultures; a systematic approach to the full spectrum of each culture, encompassing language, dance and music, indigenous knowledge and belief systems. What is almost totally lacking is awareness of the ephemeral nature of our recordings, how they are fast becoming obsolete by technological change, and the need to preserve what we have captured.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Although it is well known to the heritage institutions, awareness of the problem is only slowly trickling through to Governments, and even slower to donor agencies. Examples like the DOBES Project (<http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/>) where the donor agency has guaranteed survival by data conversion and migration for the next 50 years, are still the exception. And what are 50 years in terms of heritage?

There is a serious need to raise awareness of the value of Africa's oral culture, and the need to record it. However, recording is not enough, because dealing with this intangible heritage requires an extra effort in preservation. For example, one characteristic of intangible heritage is that it is often presented in a memorised fixed form, like praise poems, unlike the spoken language which changes everyday. The challenge is too keep it understandable, because even the narrator does not always fully understand the meaning of what he/she is narrating. It requires a special effort to keep this memory alive and understandable, place names have changed, alternative names of persons have been forgotten, explanations are necessary. Recorded orature, even if the problem of technological change is taken care of, will be just as ephemeral as the unrecorded spoken word, if it is not curated and kept alive through the generations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I illustrated that Africa has a rich cultural and historical heritage and that most of it was suppressed, destroyed and exported during the colonisation of Africa. What has survived by accident and by local resilience is often ignored by the Africans themselves because of poverty (who cares about memory when the stomachs are empty), and the colonial neocolonial education which socialised Africans to look down upon their heritage as inferior.

I see the value of the Memory of the World Programme as an incentive to inspect and evaluate our culture and heritage, and to encourage local efforts to keep it alive and preserved. UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme is a welcomed initiative, one that requires a lot of investment in Africa to teach people, to explain to people how to identify collections of enduring value and how to prepare the nominations. I expect that the recently established ARCMOW will take up that challenge.

Memory institutions such as national archives, libraries and museums, which did not preserve the memory of the African people and their communities, but the memories of the colonial state and its organs, must make a conscious and sustained effort to identify, collect and preserve the endangered cultural richness and diversity of our African continent.

The Memory of the World Programme would hopefully also help us to lobby our African Governments and the OAU to develop heritage programmes, policies and resources that would capture the survived intangible heritage still held by the elders before it is totally lost to Africa and to the world. Here I would like to bring your attention to the "Tshwane Declaration" adopted by the newly established ARCMOW in South Africa, January 2008.<sup>13</sup> Foreign assistance for this effort is welcome, but it is imperative that this programme is driven by the local initiative. We would not like to see more of our heritage taken overseas under the pretext of preservation and safekeeping, on the contrary. It is about time to restore to Africa what has been robbed over a century of colonialism.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix to this paper

UNESCO has been supporting this goal for many years, against the greed of many Western institutions who continue to justify their holding on to colonial booty. We hope UNESCO and memory institutions all over the world will also assist Africa to re-create its intangible heritage and to ensure its lasting preservation.

Finally, one hopes that UNESCO will assist Africa in claiming back the African heritage, in whatever format that was taken away from Africa, so that the current and future generations can have easy access to what rightly belongs to them.

*Ndapandula* I thank you