

Antje Majewski
The Throne

A. The throne of Sultan Ibrahim Njoya

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: The King Njoya of lore became King of the Bamoun when he was very young. There are documents claiming he was 7 years old at the time; others say he was 4 or 9 years old. But I remember that he was still a minor.

Nji Nchare Tare Nji Loumpet: When Njoya reigned, there was Njanpundunke. She was the wife of King Nsangou, mother to King Njoya. King Nsangou died young in the war, and so it was she who ruled and handed power over to her son, Njoya.

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: In the meantime, a powerful noble at court wanted—even started—a war in an effort to overthrow the young king and seize power for himself. He started the war in 1896. The war would be very, very difficult for the king, who was still a child and did not know what a war is. But it soon occurred to King Njoya to appeal to the *Peuls* of Northern Cameroon, to the Fula, and the Fula decided to come help King Njoya in this war. It must be said that the Fula were already Muslims. [Their warriors] prayed according to Islamic rites before going to the front ...

Nji Nchare Tare Nji Loumpet: But when they met the Muslims from Banyo, King Njoya asked them, “Does your religion have the equivalent of a king?” “Yes,” they answered. So he asked, “What is his name—the person who commands everyone, who ordains priests. What is his name?” “The Sultan,” they replied. “If I convert to your religion, can I become a Sultan?” King Njoya asked. “Of course!,” they said. So he said, “Well, I’m in!” He understood that political power is based on religious power, they melded together because the two operate according to the same principle: It’s subjugation; it’s humbling. It’s the same thing. It’s the sacred ... the same thing, and he understood that. After all, that’s great! He did very well, because he understood the power of the written word, [and] his writing did more than just record. It served to create an administration, enabled civil acts, weddings ... It was unfathomable.

What’s fascinating is his evolution. Within about twenty-five years, the writing system he developed went from pictograms to an alphabetic, syllabic system! That is a rare feat in history of humanity; it’s absolutely novel. He saw Arabic writing and he said, “When in war...,” because he had to confront enemies as soon as he took the throne. Tupanka was a warlord who decided to fight him. He got support from the Germans and everybody, the *Peuls* and all. He brought back the head of King Nsangou, his father, who was kept among the Nsos.

The Kingdom of Bamoun was a state in the modern sense of the word in the 19th century, which is to say it had already fulfilled the first criterion of civilization, urbanity, though the criteria of civilization are not something I came up with myself. Foumban was the very first city in all the West African Grassfields. There is a city. Civilized. That’s what it’s about, this *civitas*... So the Bamoun had a writing system. What’s left?

The Bamoun assimilated everything, digested everything, and reinstated all their external relations in their register. Before, when I spoke to you about art, about writing, I was talking

about cartography, all the achievements... See what Njoya is trying to do! Did you see King Njoya's palace? It is an adapted reproduction, equivalent to the Schloss at Buea. Just to show you the comparisons they're drawing.

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: We are inside the palace that was built by King Njoya in 1917. And you're arriving at a particular moment, just as we're about to celebrate 100 years of this palace, because actually the palace is 100 years old as of this year. We are in a palace room, a central room, a very important room that we call the room of the thrones. We call it that because you see the thrones arranged everywhere, and also because it is the room where the ruler performed many of his greatest acts as ruler. Each time the king had important decisions to make, it was in this room. And he settled on his throne to have all these royal attributes before making the necessary decision.

Here you have the throne of King Njoya, or rather a copy of the throne of King Njoya, because as it has been established that the original is exhibited in the museum in Berlin. It was brought there in 1908 by Emperor Wilhelm II. So the throne is in Berlin. This is a reproduction. How did this throne end up in Berlin? What is it doing in Berlin, the throne? Is there a King of the Bamoun in Berlin? Because the throne is for that king's use. If there isn't a King of the Bamoun in Berlin, then what's it doing there? This brings us to a little history of relations between King Njoya and the Germans.

Nji Nchare Tare Nji Loumpet: Bismarck did not want to offend France, which had lost the Franco-Prussian War in Alsace-Lorraine. It's not Germany, but France that was engaged in the colonial enterprise. Germany was more concerned with establishing hegemony in Europe. They were often often the lobbies, the merchant who organizes the colonial movement. It's the explorers, some arbitrary people... It's the independent explorers, people like Nachtigal, who go ... and then the Woermanns with their boats, who are responsible for negotiating. They're often the ones signing treaties!

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: When the Germans arrived—and here we have to note that they did indeed arrive at the Kingdom of Bamoun in 1902—before reaching the (the) Bamoun realm, they traversed the other kingdoms in Cameroon, whereupon the people decided to form a resistance to fight the Germans. But it was different when they came to Fouban. The Bamoun, who had already heard rumors of their coming, and had prepared their arrows and spears to go to and fight the Germans when King Njoya said to them, “Stop! These people ... allow me. Only I know what I can do with them. I would rather befriend them than have them as an enemy.”

He created a relationship. He received the Germans very well. He settled them upon a hill, got the ball rolling, until in 1908, to strengthen this relationship, the king decided to give them a token of his friendship. So the king gave his throne to the German emperor as a sign of friendship, because as you have seen, when a person receives you he leaves his chair, sits on another, and gives you his seat. It's an expression of deep esteem in one's own person. So that's what happened, and so the throne found its way to Germany. The king immediately thought to make an exact replica: That's this one here, the one we use.

Nji Nchare Tare Nji Loumpet: No, that's exactly it. It's another kind of diplomacy, because there's a tradition of diplomacy like that in the cultural sphere of the Grassfields, which

extends to Nigeria. [It is a tradition in which] people talk to one other, see one other; they send each other gifts to negotiate ... There is a deeply entrenched tradition of local diplomacy, and that's the same diplomacy he was practicing with the Germans. Njoya was so fascinated by the Germans that his manners were exemplary, perfect. And when you read the German administrators' reports on King Njoya, you see they considered him Germany's most faithful ally. So there is still a confrontation, which you see played out in the register of symbols of representation. King Njoya sees the Germans as the strongest representation of power. So there is no conflict, there is no animosity. Besides, the Germans exercised no direct power in Foumban. They preferred to install a German outpost in Bamenda, which is a little further on. Hence the illusion that Njoya retained his power. Look at how he dressed. There is a real demonstration of sovereignty in his costume, in his way of holding himself, and that actually makes him believe that the Germans have allowed him to retain his power. There is no conflict.

It wasn't the German emperor who asked for the throne. There was already a tradition of German ethnography. The throne will be exhibited as an object in a museum. You have to make a distinction here: It's not German power. It wasn't the Kaiser, Wilhelm II, who decided to take power. It was some enthusiastic, overzealous people who did a little too much. As for the exchange of gifts, there is a portrait of the emperor. And you see that in Foumban, the king tried to present himself in a way that resembles this portrait. These are things that are played out at the symbolic level. Now the gramophone ... Njoya did not understand it so well. I don't think he was very attuned to classical music.

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: Right, there was a gift exchange. Surely there were many. We already see how Njoya is dressed. He's dressed like a German soldier. The Germans gave him shoes that we see there—that's it, things like that, things that come from Germany. And visiting the museum you'll see a number of body armors that the Germans used to protect themselves during the First World War. The Germans gave them to King Njoya as gifts and they can be found in the museum.

Nji Nchare Tare Nji Loumpet: Njoya regretted it a bit because it was, after all, the throne. He didn't really want to make a gift of it. He regretted it because it was his father's throne. So the throne in Berlin is the throne that belonged to King Njoya's father, and King Njoya's throne is in Foumban.

Mandu Yenu was a queen who married two kings. What it meant is that she didn't want her son, Toupou, to become King of the Bamoun. She preferred to have her co-wife's son ascend to the throne so that she could marry him and remain queen once her husband died. So it became the symbol of the Bamoun throne. The throne has been called "Mandu Yenu" ever since. "Mandu" after the queen, mother of King Mbombo, and "Yenu" for the mother of King Kouotou. There, something like that.

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: Then there's the use of the throne—the throne here and the one in Germany. The problem is: Which is the real throne? Is it the one in Germany? I would say no, since there is no king sitting on it. This is the real one, since this is the one that the king actually sits on, and the throne is the king's chair. The one in Germany would be like a former minister who is still called a minister. This is the one that's really used as a throne. I went to

Germany to see how this throne is arranged. Does the throne in Germany have tusks beside it? Ivory tusks, does it have any?

Senator Pascal Anong Abidime: It does not seem so to me.

Antje Majewski: No. There aren't any.

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: That means that only part of the throne is there, because the throne here is an ensemble. You cannot see the Bamoun throne without two elephant tusks. The king takes his place on a throne positioned between two elephant tusks symbolizing defense, protection. When the king is on the throne, he is protected. So you have a throne over there, but there are no tusks, which means something is missing. We also removed a lion skin here, for conservation reasons. There is something missing, the lion skin. Because normally you would always have a lion skin installed there. The king passes by the lion skin to settle on his throne, and the throne is well placed between two elephant tusks. That's how he uses the throne. The difference between this one and the one in Germany is that this one is used. The king always uses it. And whenever we have our big celebration—which we call the Ngoun—we take the throne out, bring it back to where the feast is being held, and the king uses it. But the other one in Germany is beautiful; it's well maintained. I saw it for myself in Zurich. It was on view at the Rietberg Museum. It's very beautiful, very well-maintained, but not used for its natural purpose.

B. Thoughts on the charged object

Albertin Koupgang: I think regardless of whether the throne is the original or a copy, it's important that these objects come back. Because when the object leaves its environment to be over there, there is too big an obstacle to understanding it. It's when an object is in use that we understand its utility, its functionality. In this case it's over there in Europe, locked up in jail—I call it prison because really the object loses all its meaning, in my opinion. Because when the object is here, it is charged. It communes with nature, with the ancestors... Our ancestors are not over there! They are here! So the object doesn't serve the same purpose when it's abroad; it doesn't have the same power that it does here, in the place where it was conceived and made.

Ambroise Flaubert Taboue Nouaye: African society is a society of conviviality, generosity, of *Mku'u*, as they say at home; it's a society of hospitality. *Mku'u*, when we define it literally, can be seen as respect and so on. But it is hospitality. And there is respect in hospitality ... that's in an African's genes. And that's why we've had this approach to gift-giving since time immemorial. What pains me is the objects that are identified as having been given to someone or other by "the king." Which king? The names of kings were known! There are very few pieces that explicitly name the king who gave it. This gets to the root of the problem. The problem is not so much in the incarnation or the spirit—the immaterial realm that we put into the object. Because we also wouldn't want... I, for example, as a patrimony specialist, wouldn't want to take away what the West has unintentionally recognized in African artisanship, particularly with regard to the artists who created it. Because before they were cultural objects and social objects, they were created by men, often in taboo conditions that we might find atrocious.

René POUNDÉ: Most of the objects we would want returned are objects that have to do with sovereignty or ritual—which means that they concerned the entire community. Not objects

from individuals who wanted to solidify a friendship or who thought to exchange in a pecuniary way. No, it's not that.

Antje Majewski: But, if I understand correctly, you didn't even have this notion of exchanging an artwork for money before the colonizers arrived.

RP: No.

AM: The artist was paid with things to eat ...

RP: Yes. He was ennobled! He was given women! And so his life was fulfilled. It was one of the ways to access power. To become noble.

X3x: Why did they work in the royal workshops? Because the king took charge of the artists. The artist works for the community; he puts himself at the service of the community. He was not there to make works for individuals. He was answering a social question. For the commission to reach the artist, the subject matter would have had to be a topic of much debate, either within customary societies or within castes. But all this in the interest of the community. And the king is only the guardian; the king is only the tenant of the palace. You see that today: Once a king takes possession of the throne, everyone goes away, to Yaoundé or ... Because we left the institution, we've done everything since colonization to destroy that institution. And it's an unparalleled democratic institution, an institution that respects rights and respects values, an institution that preached the spirit of merit.

Nji Nchare Tare Nji Loumpet: Njoya's had to ensure the Ncharé dynasty's continuation against all external forces. King Njoya thinks of Cameroon as something external. The same can be said of all Bamoun kings.

Bamoun society is a hierarchical, medieval society. The land upon which the kingdom is located, the entire kingdom, belongs to the king. It was conquered by war, by weapons. It's a people of warriors. And it is divided among all the king's legitimate sons, the king's direct descendants. Those who become *Nji* (princes) without being of the Ncharé dynasty are assimilated. It means that the greatest thing you can do is be the son of the king—master of the Foumban territory and its external domains. And the noble Bamoun prince is a warrior. He's like a lord in the middle ages. He has territories, and people work those lands, and so they have a right to usufruct and so on. People who were not born noble in medieval society were likely to be a slave. They served.

Listen to me, I am a prince in direct filiation of the Ncharé dynasty. When I call someone, you see how he'll kneel before me for nothing. In return, I have to protect him and so on and so forth! When he tells you there's wind coming into his house, you do not cross your arms! It's like that, there is no state of slavery. He's not a slave... and people who are in a servile position accept their condition. I don't know if I'm in the best position to talk about it, but it's a society that works like that, and they adhere to it. Have you seen this deference around the king?

You are in a country apart, haven't you had this feeling for a while? The king is so strong, the people so united... You have to see it for yourself at a Nguon celebration: He has 70,000 people walking behind him. Have you heard of that? That is eminently political.

To stay kKing of the Bamoun, you have to know what is happening in Yaoundé. He was head of the French High Commissioner's cabinet in the colonial era; he is a minister, he's whatever you want. He is an ambassador, Minister of the Territorial Administration, head of all the Cameroonian administration at the territorial level, which is to say he is in charge of

governors, prefects and sub-prefects. He was Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs; he knows what's happening! But his goal is not ... I don't speak for him, but I think that ... he is a member of the political office of the ruling party... Nobody is elected here in Cameroon, everyone is appointed.

Albertin Koupgang: Well, it's when they catch the new prince to be initiated, to fulfill the function of the king—that's when he's brought to the place of initiation called *La'akam*, a place where he will go to follow the rites of rulership for nine weeks. This is where the new leader is charged with all the mystical-religious power, by initiated nobles. There is this function of initiating the divine traditional rite, the divine charge that has to do with him in the chieftaincy. For me, he is the first priest of the cult. Because in reality, when certain rituals need to be performed, the chief has his servants go do it. He is the one that needs to be there to do it. The charge is up to the first religious priest. The chief is a priest. The first.

René Poundé: We go to church on Sunday. But before going to church on Sunday... yesterday was Saturday. That is our day for funerals and mourning. On Friday we went to report to the ancestors; Wednesday we did the implantation. And after all these rituals, we invite the priest to our funeral. And that is how we practice our rituals.

Albertin Koupgang: It is a religious force, an immaterial force. It's hard to describe the unseen. Trying to describe what we do not see ... For me it's really very awesome forces, and often we have evidence of them in everyday life. It happens that the leader, for example—a person who is charged with power, has his object. That object is also charged, and if you use it, it can bring you a stroke of bad luck. Your rib will be break if you sit on a chief's seat, for example. That's reality. Also if you sit there, knowingly, just to see what will happen, you'll have something negative happen to you. At that moment, you have to go cleanse yourself, to get rid of the bad fortune.

René Poundé: So each object is the receptacle of ideas—either those of the creator, if he alone decided to create this object, or of the societies or people who commissioned it. And so it is a receptacle. And that is what makes it, as we say, charged. The charge is not a ritual practice where we take herbs, we mix, we do the grigris, etc... No, it's the word! It's the word that is put into an object to make it sacred, and the word is the way of expressing ideas.

Ginette Daleu: Speaking of receptacles, I have a question for Mr. René Poundé. Isn't the human being a receptacle? Isn't man a receptacle? When we talk about creation, there is the creator who makes a ball. He blows on the ball, the clot of earth, the object, and when he blows he gives life to the ball. And the ball now is a human being. He reflects; he thinks; he walks; he is intelligent.

René Poundé: That's what he believes.

DG: Who believes?

RP: He believes that he is intelligent.

DG: Humans are intelligent!

RP: This hasn't been proven. Such is the pride of men.

DG: I don't know; wouldn't you also say that the human being is a receptacle?

RP: Yes, but...

DG: And when he creates objects, these objects there, too... The human being infuses it with energy, with the power of his thoughts.

RP: Yes, but as I said: That is if we're speaking using your logic, which is to say there is someone called God who made man by blowing on him, right? Well, ever since God created the human being, it seems the human being never stops wanting to be on a par with God. What is he doing? When he makes an object, he does the same thing. No? So God allowed him to be a receptacle; he allows the object to be a receptacle. And it's hardly amazing, but I think all those questions... when I'm asked questions like that... Have you never seen a statuette dance?

Albertin Koupgang: Take an object that belongs to the chief, for example—the chief who is already a sacred person, endowed with mystical-religious power. You know it's our custom that you don't just shake the chief's hand just like that. So when an object is touched by the chief, that object is charged. Say we make a chair that is placed in the palace and he sits on it; that object is charged. It has religious power. The object is no longer of the same material dimension; it is of a religious dimension, so you can no longer approach, you cannot touch the object. Let's say an object—take the case of a chief's throne, for example—leaves here, goes to Europe and is allowed to return to its normal environment. If it is brought back and the chief uses it, then the object will simply be charged.

It's like a patient lying sick at the hospital. And as soon as you give him his cure, he's healed. So if we can do that for an object—recharge it with its usual powers—then it will continue to live and fulfill the mission it was assigned at the beginning.

Ginette Daleu: So if the object returns...

René Pounké: It will be put back where it was.

GD: Will it regain that same energy?

RP: Of course, it doesn't lose that. It's an object that was sacralized for a given place, for a given function. Wherever it goes it keeps that, but it can only be effective in its given place.

C. Thoughts on restitution

Nji Oumarou Ncharé: You know they have this policy of restitution for cultural property now, which pushes people to ask us to vindicate, demand, to claim this throne. In principle it should return to Foumban. The politics is good, but politics has to satisfy several conditions as far as I'm concerned. To claim a cultural commodity, I believe you need to know the mode by which that commodity was acquired. You have to know the conditions under which it left. If I give someone a present today, and my son comes to ask me to get it back—I don't think that sounds good. But if it's established that this falls within the scope of illicitly exported cultural property, then I think it is absolutely necessary to bring that throne back. But as far as I know, it was a gift.

René Pounké: But it is property of the Bamoun! What's it doing in Germany? Like the Tukak (a mask). What's it doing at [Musée du] quai Branly?

What are all these masses of objects in their inventory doing there?

The king and his dignitaries gave it, offered it to someone who didn't see it; it was given under pressure and fear. That's why it was neither stolen nor gifted. Because the image of the Schutztruppe, the German colonial troops... Troops would pass through and if you didn't

give them something they liked, they hanged you. Don't laugh because it really happened. If we go from here to Bafang, the *Mu'fo'o* (princes) counted how many chiefs they hanged after they had tried to interdict [the troops'] passage and demand some payment for the right to pass.

So people got to work preparing gifts as soon as they heard that [the troops] were coming, so as not to give the impression that they might be a bit angry.

Flaubert Ambroise Taboue Nouaye: It's worth its weight in gold—which is to say it's an object that has entered into the canon of the social dispositif of the people of Fouban. But this example cannot obstruct all these thousands of objects. Because for me, the case you took on in the object from Fouban, it may be a little bit like a little entertainment.

It's clear, the object was a gift, and there is another object that functions here. Without agreeing with those African colleagues who say, "Well, it's not a problem that the works left, stolen or not. In Africa we have this strength of creativity. Once it's gone, we reincarnate it on the side..."

You also find other Western conservators who say, "No, the object will rot if we retrocede it; they have nothing to conserve it." But now see see that it was not a priority after the independences; we see now that there was a determination. There is a cultural and artistic consumption of art, even if it is slow, taking place in Africa. We have chieftaincies today that have houses, that were privileged. That's why the works were stolen in the first place. The king, once he received a Westerner, brought him into a space, the house. The servants were the custodians. And they said no, they never knew the history of the museum, they didn't know conservation—no! All these works were there because there was a whole group of people who had only that to do as a profession.

Western museums and African museums will look at each other with positive, fair regard. Not a regard from a pedestal where ... because why should these museums—say the museum in Berlin or the museum in Paris—be more interesting than the Bandjoun Museum in Cameroon or the museum in Bamendjou or the foundation where I work? No, I don't think they are. You have to understand that the museum is not limited to its dimension, the structure—it's also about what goes on there. The museum is a space that has to educate, that has to advise. And as long as we agree on that, it would mean that you can fulfill that educational task just as well on four square meters as you could on a thousand. Such an approach would enable Western museums to work with African museums to circulate these works.

The West will consider itself a depositary in good sense, one could say, as the guardian of these collections, and it will consider all the peoples who produce these objects to be their owners.

Sultan Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya: I have welcomed many German delegations here, also in private, and I really told them the story and that I have the impression that we don't enjoy the friendship we expected of the Germans, the friendship this country had in the Kingdom of Bamoun era. I told them I went on this visit to Switzerland and saw an exhibition that had the throne of King Njoya, and it touched me. I remember the journalists asked me if I wouldn't want to demand the return of this throne to Cameroon. Don't I think about making such a request? And I said no; it would truly be an insult to my grandfather because he had given it as a gift. It's not an object like the ones the colonizers took by force. As for the objects that were taken by force, we can ask that certain people should request our permission to allow

them to leave Cameroon. But in this case, it was a gift. If the Berlin museum were to consider giving us a present in return, we have no problem with that—because as you've seen, we have the same throne here. He gave one as a gift and had another one made here so as not to be deprived of his throne. So there are things that would serve to improve relations between us; we might even benefit from cultural investments. Although we have had positive gestures from time to time, they do not reflect the weight of the relationship that existed between Germany and King Njoya. So we hope that will change one day with information like the kind you are collecting. Perhaps it will circulate and one day we will see the answer. Thank you very much.