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The Negro King Njoya

von Anna Oehler

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Far away in Africa is Fumban, the proud city of the king. It does not lie down below along the hot seashore, nor within the ancient wood, but in the airy hills of the Cameroon grasslands. In this area, there is nothing but grass as far as the eye can see. The grass is so high that large men and animals, yes even elephants, are easily hidden in it—like crickets and grasshoppers are hidden in the grass in our country. Surely you'd like to play hide-and-seek there. Right? But what if you were to encounter an elephant, a buffalo, or even a lion?

You must walk many days if you want to get to Fumban. You must climb many mountains and drag yourself through many hot valleys. You must wade through rivers swarming with crocodiles and hippopotamuses, and in this manner you must continue onward. Soon sweat runs from your forehead and soon an icy cold wind blows through your clothes to the skin so that you shiver. Today, not a breeze stirs, and men and animals are faint and wish to sleep. Only now and then a splendid black bird, with his long tail raised, lifts itself for a brief moment and then silently buries itself again in the endless sea of grass. Tomorrow a wild tornado storm will sweep through here, ripping the grass from the cottage roofs, kinking the high reeds and shaking the proud palms.

Finally you come to a wide moat and then another, five meters deep. The earth dug up from the ditches builds a protective rampart for the city. On the top thereof is a wall two meters high and just as thick, with notches for shooting. Both moats surround the city. If you wished to travel around the outermost ditch, you would need more than twelve hours. Watch guards with long spears stand at the entrance gate. Now you are in Fumban, and the blacks here are called the Bamum people. Their neat houses lie between fields and banana gardens around the marketplace and the king's farm. A wide road leads from the Bamenda gate to the middle of the city. There it

is swarming with people. You see splendid negro figures, men and women with colorful long robes and rich jewelry. You also see poor, miserable beggars cowering on the road, wrapped in bad rags.

From the main street, a small avenue leads left toward the king's palace. It consists of many houses built very closely together whose grass roofs rest on strong wood posts. The walls of the houses consist of thousands of palm leaves that have been closely bound to each other. The houses are decorated with wide pieces of frieze woven out of grass. They are decorated with strange pictures of animals, like leopards and crocodiles, which have been burned on with hot iron rods. On either side of the palace there are two rows of houses where the king's wives live. In the middle there sits a younger man under the gate. The man is wearing a white silk turban and a long, costly robe covers his broad-shouldered figure. That is Njoya, the Negro king. (See the picture on the cover.)

It is not easy to be the Negro king. I have just read the history of the Bamum kings, written by Njoya, "with the head of its body," as he expresses it in his own words, and translated by a missionary. But this story is so sad that I cannot tell it to you. However, in order for you to see what paganism is, I must tell you a few things from it. There were always battles between kings in which one king would kill the other and the ground upon which the proud city of the king, Fumban, now stands is stained red with blood.

The last king was Nsangu, the father of Njoya. However in a terrible war with the people of Bansso, he fell in battle and was beheaded and with him about 1500 Bamum people were killed. Horrible lamentation spread throughout the city of the king and the king's mother, his sisters and his wives, amounting to 70 people, took their own lives.

Njoya was but a lad when he became king and he simply put to death whoever refused to acknowledge him as such. So it was, Njoya had blood on his hands before he had even become a man.

When Njoya got older, he took many wives, built them cottages and provided for them and soon the kingdom swarmed with little black princes and princesses. -- One day Wadukam, a servant of the king, kidnapped three of the king's children, one girl and two boys. He fled, collected wild blood-thirsty Negroes and commanded them to attack the city and set the city on fire with torches made from palm leaves. As the red flames shot from the dry grass roofs and women and children stumbled from their huts shouting out with agony, a terrible massacre began. The people were mowed down like the grass. There were so many dead in the courtyards, that one did not know where to set foot. The war continued for two years between Njoya and Wadukam. The king's city looked terrible; the houses were burned, most of the people were dead, and those who still lived had nothing to eat because everything had been destroyed. In the end, Wadukam was conquered, captured, and cruelly slain.

When Njoya was still just a boy, he had seen once how his father bought books from Mecca for 320,000 Kauri shells, about 1,000 Franken. The man who had brought them was a Haussa, which is a Negro tribe of Muhammed that is widely dispersed through Africa and whose main business is to practice trade. The books were Arabic, so Njoya could not understand them.

This did not allow him peace of mind, and as he became older he was ashamed that he could neither read nor write.

Yet he was much too proud to learn Arabic from this Hausa stranger. Now for some time there were Europeans in Fumban, German merchants, but he did not believe that one could write down the Bamum language with their style of writing, and so he always studied so that he could devise a style of writing for his own language.

There one night, so he says, a dream circled about him and said, "You should take a board and write upon it in the hand of men, and wash it off and drink it." On a following day the king did this. Then his heart told him to command his people, saying that they should invent language characters and bring them to him. Njoya inspected and selected them, until he had a beautiful symbol for every syllable in the Bamum language. Then the method of writing was completed, and Njoya immediately established a school in his palace. He himself was the teacher, and he taught the black people how to read and write in the Bamum language.

Gradually, more and more Hausa settled in the heathen city of the king. They bought and sold, and wandered down to the coast, bringing with them good and bad commodities and much news up into the grassland. They told of their God Allah, and of his prophet Mohammed. Finally, Njoya constructed a Mosque for them in the marketplace. More and more Muslims came. They brought amulets and sold them to the Heathens and soon, no one ran around Fumban, without the Arabic magic sayings. Yes, even the children wore such charms in leather bags, tied to the horns. But the Hausa were not always peaceful people. Therefore, the King expelled them all from the city and he settled them in a different village. And later the Basel missionaries came, and he had the mosque torn down and rebuilt it in the Hausa village. Thus, he was rid of the annoying windbags; he had realized for a long time, that they were not honest, and that their evil, dishonest nature and corrupt living were not congruent with their many prayers and with the holy books.

One day, a lot of activity took place in front of the King's Palace. It was market day and because the market place was in front of the King's house, there life was the loudest and most colorful. There is nothing you cannot buy! Peas, beans, peanuts, oil broth, oxen-, sheep- and goat-meat, loin cloths, and scarves, weapons, purses, snuff bags made out of fine leather with colorful trim, charms, knives, baskets.

There was screaming, screeching, quarreling, such that no one could hear their own words. - "Do you already know?" his neighbor yelled in his ears, "Do you already know that today the whites are coming?" "The whites? From where? Why?" people called out in confusion. "Why?" was the reply. "It is said, they want us to bring a new religion." "That is not so uncommon," was the contemptuous reply, "The Hausa also brought a new religion and they still are no better than us, and the spell, which I bought for eight hens, did not work. I want nothing to do with this new religion." And with that, he lifted a piece of buffalo meat from the ground, weighed it in his hand, smelled it, and bought it.

"They're coming, they're coming! They are at the Bamenda gate! I have seen them, they're coming!" It was a bold fellow with bright teeth and red-and-white loin cloth. With this news, he hopped through the colorful crowd, and soon thereafter, a drum roll sounded and all dignitaries clustered behind the chief's chair under the gate. They stood beautiful and taut in two

long rows and all looked down the street along which the white people should come. They stood beautiful and taut in two long rows and all looked down the street from whence the white people should come. The king's wives wanted to see, too; one looked over the other's shoulder, but did not venture any farther out. Only the king's portly mother sat down on her throne, for she knew that, next to the king, she was the most important person there.

It was two whites, who, surrounded by a multitude of dancing Negro children and followed by many load-bearers, stepped into the palace. The king stood and moved majestically toward the strangers. His robes reached almost to the ground.

He led his guests through the gate to where stools had already been brought, and asked them to sit down. Then the dignitaries also sat down on the ground and greeted each other with loud clapping. Three black boys came bowing low.

At the king's sign, the first placed a little pearl-studded table before him. The second brought a little covered basket, out of which the king took three goblets. The third boy had a fine palm wine jug under his arm, and waited for the king's sign in order to fill the goblets with the refreshing palm wine.

When the king raised his goblet to toast the whites, the cowering dignitaries bowed their heads to the earth and covered their faces with their hands, and the people busy in the marketplace put aside their work and did the same. After the three goblets were emptied, the king gave a signal and, to clapping and cheers, addressed the crowd again.

Another day, when one of the whites showed Njoya a Bible, the Negro king grabbed hastily at the book and insisted, "Read me something from that." And the white man read, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The Negro king listened to the wonderful words. Meek? Merciful? Pure in heart. When the white man stopped reading, the black king lifted his head and said, "Those are true words, Massa (sir). I know that if I do good, only then will God reward me, but how can I do good when the people around me are so bad?"

The two men spoke for a long time, and in the black king's heart awakened a longing for the lesson that the white men had brought. As they parted, Njoya gave the missionary a beautiful ivory tusk and asked him to come again soon to Bamum.

The missionary departed. Njoya continued to live as he had before. He ruled as the true heathen monarch. His subjects followed him more out of fear, than love, because they knew that he possessed dangerous medicine and that he would give to those, who displeased him. In his hands lay life and death for his black people. When there were arguments, he was the judge. Under the projecting rooftop of a portico he sat and decided the verdict of each case. With backs hunched and bent, and hands over their mouths to prevent their breath from touching the king, they carefully approached him. Speaking in whispers, they discussed the affair with him. If the king cleared his throat -- then the entire party; servants, less-powerful chiefs, and judges clapped their hands. The same was the case when the king coughed or sneezed. Thus they demonstrated their reverence for him. When the king gave the verdict, his scribe wrote it down. He, who won the case, was expected to pay one Franc and 25 cents, because his argument was upheld, the loser was not expected to pay the fee.

In war Njoya was the commander. In triumph, he would bring the decapitated heads of his enemies to Fumban. Then his people would cheer and say that he was a great commander. -- Whatever the wars had made desolate and the fires had turned to ashes, Njoya caused to be rebuilt and replanted. He worked tirelessly for his village and his people. But in the evenings, he withdrew to carefully and meticulously record the revenues and expenditures of the day, recipes for good and bad medicine, and lastly to write about the interesting things he had experienced or heard over the course of the day.

Meanwhile, the German government had many conflicts in the rebellious Bansso tribe. Finally, they were subdued and so the head of the Bamum king, fallen in battle eight years earlier, fell into the hands of the Germans, and Njoya was told, he could fetch the head of his father, King Nsangu, at the victor's camp.. One day, in a celebrative procession with a large retinue, Njoya arrived and the skull was brought to Njoya. Sobbing loudly, Njoya kissed the king's skull through his tears, then pressed it to his chest with hot, overflowing childlike love. He and his companions with heads bared then followed behind the basket wherein the head of the king would be carried back to his kingdom.

The procession was greeted with shouts of joy in Fumban. Njoya was also happy, for while the head of his father was still in the hands of his enemies, many did not consider him to be a proper king. When the cheering subsided, the entire population again began to mourn the death of the king. The people smeared themselves from head to toe with white paint and ripped their clothing, and the continuous, loud wailing of the women filled the air. Day and night the heart-wrenching tones of their mournful songs could be heard.

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Two years later, Njoya had a lot to do because the whites had returned, and this time not only to visit Fumban, but to settle down entirely. They had hardly arrived at the Negro hut, where they would live temporarily, when ambassadors from the king arrived bringing two goats, chickens, sweet potatoes, Pisang, two pots of palm oil, forty eggs, six Kalabassan palm wine, and fire wood. He also offered 130 men to be used at their disposal. And because he was so excited about the arrival of the whites, he kept thinking of new things to do to help them so that the construction of the mission house along with the kitchen and the side rooms would be completed as soon as possible. The black majesty himself often stood on the mission hill to see how far along they were. And the fat queen mother let herself be carried up because she, too, wanted to see everything being built.

"When the mission house is finished we are going to build a school," said Njoya deliberately. "Then I myself will also learn from you. But not with the small black urchins, I will take private lessons."--That was a celebration, when the school building was finished and dedicated; in addition, sixty future students had their heads shaved. And because the king had demanded it, they had washed themselves so clean, that they gleamed like freshly shined boots. The little boys took going to school very seriously. They were there every morning, and when one was sick, he sent his brother in his place. The brother silently sat himself on his brother's seat, and when his brother's name was called, he shouted with might and main, "Here!".

It wasn't long until the Bamum tribe hauled palm leaves and clay together again to build a new house. There, in the marketplace in front of the king's house, where the Muslim Mosque once stood, Njoya had a spacious church built that sat 400. He had the walls adorned with unusual animal pictures, just the same as the walls in his palaces.

-- On Pentecost in 1907, the curious chapel was dedicated, and there, it was so completely packed that no one inside could move. Naturally, the king and his mother were also there and they came every Sunday. Every seat was always occupied and those who did not get a seat crowded in front of the open doors. So Njoya had a second church built in another district, so that more of his people could hear the good word of God.

In the meantime, white women also came to Fumban and assembled the small black daughters of the king together to tell them Bible stories. How nice and clean the children looked when they, accompanied by their royal mothers, climbed the mission's hill. Soon, there were so many, that a special school for girls was established. The little children were diligent. They learned to read and write quickly and let their little, slender fingers make fine handiwork. Only arithmetic seemed difficult. Their curly-haired heads could not grasp arithmetic, and when the hour was over, the kids rushed out of the room, and with loud games, their minds would banish the ugly equations. Obedience could have gone better in the girls' school. The little princesses, in particular, resisted quite haughtily. They stiffened their necks, held their heads high, and said with flashing eyes, "Am I not a child of a king? May I not do whatever I want?" ----- But the softness of the white woman's hands knew how to lead the prideful king's children. When, after many years, the first heathen baptism in Fumban took place, 18 little princesses were among the 80 people baptized. As they stood in front of the altar in the church in their little white dresses, the mission school choir sang words reflecting the pious desire of every Christian heart: "Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee..."

Seldom did Njoya leave his city. His government and "the God thing," as he called the mission, gave him so much to do, that he was happy when he could be at home.

One day, however, he decided to make the long trip to the coast, in order to consult a European doctor about his eye trouble. On horseback, he was accompanied by twenty-two horsebacked dignitaries and many soldiers and servants.

Sixty men had the sole task of transporting Njoya's beautiful throne, inherited from his father and valued at 7000 Marks, to the coast, because the Negro king had decided he would give it to the German Kaiser.

After Njoya had taken care of his business, he made the twenty-two day return trip to the Grasslands. Scarcely had the caravan crossed the Nun River. and had again entered the Bamum territory, when an envoy came from the Queen Mother of Fumban with food and drink for Njoya. One of the messengers had to return immediately with a piece of the king's clothing, so that after such a long separation from her son "her heart would be heal again" from the sight of it.

The gates to the city were densely packed by festively decorated Bamum people, who had come to welcome their king. How happy and proud Njoya was when the applause and cheering of his people greeted him.

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The rainy season was over. In the gardens of Fumban, the women were busy at the work of planting and weeding, because the herbs and weeds now grew in competition. Outside, near the village wall laid a small, clean farmstead. A young woman leaned on her rake and watched the sinking sun as five little children played and crawled around near her. Her red scarf glowed and the wind played with her long blue dress. She then grabbed her tools and stepped into the hut. In the entrance by the door, hung clean polished dishes. She got them down and placed a big pot of porridge amid the group of black children. After everyone was full, the woman reached up and grabbed the chair from the trunk of a palm tree on the ceiling, because that is where it hung when no one was using it or sitting in it. She then placed it in front of the hut to enjoy the cool of the evening. She listened for a while to the humming of the bugs, and her black eyes followed contemplatively one of the shimmering, colorful butterflies as it searched for a blossom to rest upon for the night. Then suddenly the peaceful expression left her face. She stretched her head forward and listened tensely, her hand cupped behind her ear, as the features of her face revealed her fear and horror.

Then she jumped up and hurried into her hut.

Through the still air a short, bellowing, dull roar sounded. With hands that were trembling from anxiety, the woman barricaded the door of the hut, for she recognized the voice of the lion.

It was a terrifying night. The children clung to each other and cried loudly to the mother and the father was away with other courageous men to hunt the lion. Towards morning, the news came that the lion had not yet been captured, and three people had been killed the past night.

This day and the following no woman or child ventured out of their huts without great need, because each new bit of ever more frightening news spread through the town like wild fire. One lion became two and three victims became ten. -- On Good Friday, the shout of acclamation shot through Fumban: „The lions have been captured! The lions are dead!” In the market the masses bustled, and in front of the king’s house the dead bodies of the lions were triumphantly displayed to him. Both animals had gone into the trap and roared loudly as their lives ended by spear and lance. Each of the three men, who had shown especially great courage during this capture, was given a woman by Njoya as a reward.

Peace and quiet had been restored to Fumban once again when Easter Sunday morning broke. Once again people old and young poured into the house of God. Yes, perhaps more came than before. They were overcome with gratitude and joy that they could once again dwell safely within the walls of the king’s city.

One day the missionary said to the black ruler “King Njoya, would you allow me to come sing with your wives twice a week?” -- Njoya agreed. He himself went and called all of his baptized wives together in a large hall. He also came to listen to the singing. Even the heathen wives came out of their huts or at least stuck their heads out.

When they went back to their work, songs came to their minds and they hummed it to themselves. Whenever one of them was sick a white woman came to visit and care for them.

Under such circumstances it was not long before the sick woman and the white woman were good friends. The song, the Christian song, had imperceptibly made a path for the word of God in hearts of the heathen women.

From day to day, from year to year, others came wanting to be Christians. Some from the king's own house, others came from poor huts. How is it possible, that Njoya himself cannot decide to take this step? — Look there, he stands in the middle of his wives in costly royal apparel. All riches and all power in Fumban are his. Surely the Savior knows him and has smiled favorably upon him. Yet he is like the rich young man of the Orient, and like him, he also could not choose to follow the Lord. The king of kings is not yet entered into his heart. But we will not give up hope. The day will come when even the proud Negro king will know:

*Jesus Christ reigns as King,
All will serve him,
Every knee will bow,
Every tongue shall confess,
That Christ is their Lord,
All must give him honor.*