

## Nsa'ngu's Head: The Mythification of the Past in the Search for Importance, Identity and Excuses or Cover-ups<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

During the last Nso'-Mum War of the late 1880s, the Foil of Main, Nsa'ngu, was beheaded in battle. This decapitation, the identification of the royal skull, its handling, treatment and storage in Nso', and its eventual restoration have since been shrouded in legend. The anchor of each legend has sought to mythicize the event either in the search for importance or identity, or in the desire to make excuses for or cover-up some atrocity. This behaviour is to be expected in oral history data collection: some informants set out to be dramatic or to personalise events in order to serve specific goals or interests. But, it could also have resulted from faulty, illusional, confused or simply downright wrong memory, or from the ability of some informants to stress or inform only about part of the vent they observed or that had the greatest significance to them. Although, taken together, the legends display some controversies, disagreements and discrepancies, they nevertheless retain the Kernel of history: during the last Nso'-Mum War, treated and stored in Nso', and eventually restored to the Mum through the Germans under duress.

### RESUME

Pendant la dernière guerre ayant opposé les Nso' et les Bamoum à la fin des années 1880, le Fon des Bamoum, Nsa'ngu, fut décapité au cours d'une bataille. Depuis lors, aussi bien cette décapitation que l'identification, la manipulation, le traitement et la conservation de crâne royal chez les Nso', et sa restitution définitive ont été plongés dans le légende. L'auteur de chaque légende a cherché à mythifier l'événement, soit pour rehausser son importance ou son identité, soit pour excuser ou couvrir une quelconque atrocité. Il faut s'attendre à cette attitude dans la collecte des données de l'histoire orale: certains informateurs cherchent à théâtraliser ou à personnaliser les événements pour servir des buts et des intérêts particuliers. Mais, cela pourrait aussi résulter d'une mémoire défaillante, illusionnaire ou confuse, tout simplement mauvaise, ou provenir de la capacité de certains informateurs à souligner ou à renseigner sur une partie de l'événement observé ou digne pour eux du plus grand intérêt. Malgré les oppositions, les désaccords et les disparités de ces légendes, toutes conservant néanmoins le royaume de l'histoire: pendant la dernière guerre des Nso' et des Bamoum, le Fon des Bamoum fut décapité lors d'une bataille et son crâne bien traité et conservé chez les Nso', et finalement restitué aux bamoum sous la pression allemande.

### Introduction

The former Nso' *fon*dom (kingdom), a composite polity of more than a dozen chiefdoms, with an area of about 2,300 square kilometres, was located at the northeast of what later became Southern Cameroons, the southern portion of the former British administered section of the former German Protectorate of Kamerun. It was the largest polity in that British administered section of Kamerun. It is today represented by Bui Division of the North West Province of Cameroon with a population of 142,015 in 1976 and 189,361 in 1987. To its southeast lay the former *fon*dom of Mum, a composite polity of about a dozen chiefdoms, with an area of about 8,000 square kilometres. This was the largest polity in the former French administered section of the former German Protectorate of Kamerun. It is today represented by Noun Division of the West Province of Cameroon with a population of 197,529 in 1976 and 258,016 in 1987 (Chem-Langhëë 1989:6-7; [Lantum] 1987:19-20; Tardits 1985:67).

These two kingdoms, whose founding dynasties are said to have been the siblings of the Fon (King) of Rifém or Kimi in present-day Bañkim, were constantly at war with each other in the 19th century, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper. During the last of these wars, that which occurred in the 1880s,<sup>2</sup> the Fon of Mum, Nsa'ngu (Sa'nguv in Nso') was beheaded in battle. The decapitation of Nsa'ngu, the handling and storage of his skull in Nso', and the eventual restoration of the royal skull to the Mum have been shrouded in legend.

<sup>2</sup>There is as yet no agreement on the date of the war. Dugast and Jeffreys (1950:1) put the date at a little bit earlier than 1880. In a later paper, Jeffreys (1962:112) rejected an earlier date of 1888 which he said he had established (and which we have not seen in the source to which he directed his readers) in favour of 1892. In reaction to this Jeffreys' new date, Kaberry (1962:140) argued that her own evidence "tended to confirm Dr. Jeffreys dating for Nsaangu's death as occurring at least between 1882 and 1889, rather than at a later date (1898) reported in German official accounts," and that there was "a convergence of evidence for dating it between 1885 and 1889." Nkwi and Warnier (1892:136) later dated it at about 1885-88. Mzeka (1990:71) put it recently at about 1886. More recently, however, Njiasse Njoya (1994:9) has put it at between 1885 and 1887. Taken together, these dates suggest that the event occurred in the second half of the 1880s.

<sup>1</sup> The first part of this title is borrowed from M.D.W. Jeffreys, "Nsaangu's Head," *African Studies* 5:1 (March 1946):57, with a modification in the spelling of the name "Nsaangu."

Some versions of the legend have been provided or collected and published by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya, son and successor of Nsa'ngu, only one of which versions will form part of this paper. Others were collected and published by Mervyn David Waldgrave Jeffreys, only two of which will form part of this study. Yet, others, which will be published here for the first time, were collected by Phyllis Mary Kaberry and Elizabeth Millicent Chilver.<sup>3</sup> None of the authors of the published versions has made any attempt to see beyond the face value of the versions, although some of them have attempted to show the significance of the royal skull to the Mum and to, occasionally, indicate the discrepancies in some of the versions. Our purpose is to present a few of the already published and nearly all of the yet unpublished versions here, read more meaning into them beyond their face value, and relate our findings to the problems of oral history. We propose to demonstrate that the creators of most of the versions mythicized the past in the search for importance, identity and excuses or cover-ups.

The discussion that follows, which begins with the versions that emanated from the Mum, depends largely on the 1958, 1960 and 1963 precious fieldnotes of Chilver and the late Kaberry, which the former generously made available to us in accordance with the express wishes of the latter,<sup>4</sup> on Jeffreys' article in *African Studies* 5:1 (March 1946):57-62, and on one of Sultan Ibrahim Njoya's published versions of the event.

#### Versions of Mum Origin

The first version of this legend to be considered is that of Sultan Ibrahim Njoya of Mum, which was translated into French from the script which he invented by Pasteur Henri Martin (and Isaac Pareà) in 1952. According to Njoya (1952: chap. 124), when Nsa'ngu invaded Nso' for the second (and last) time, Nso' forces came out against the forces of Mum who were under the command of Nji Muamfon Njikam (brother-rival of Nsa'ngu) and those who were still on their way to Nso'. When some of the Mum forces under the command of Nji Milliom (another brother-rival of Nsa'ngu) left their command in large numbers and came to King Nsa'ngu, he took up his gun and fought courageously.

Since Nso' forces were chiefly aiming at King Nsa'ngu, his forces pleaded with him to withdraw from the battle and watch them fight. He replied that he could not flee before the enemy and, instead, encouraged his ten most courageous warriors to fight with him to the last man. With that, they put the Nso' forces to flight. But, the Nso' forces returned and killed many Mum retainer-warriors in great numbers. However, when the Mum counterattacked with their Fon, who was then singing in their midst, there were great losses on both sides and few survivors on the side of the Mum.

<sup>3</sup>There are other published versions which, because they are confections of some of the already published ones, need not bother us here.

<sup>4</sup>We are very grateful to Mrs. E.M. Chilver for putting at our disposal these fieldnotes and for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which comments enabled us refocus the paper. We are also grateful to Dr. Matthias L. Niba for his invaluable comments on the same draft.

As the Nso' forces continued to advance, Nsa'ngu and the only seven fighters left with him counterattacked, in the process of which he exhausted all his spears and took up his cutlass to continue the fight. But the Nso' forces succeeded in wounding him in the left shoulder with a spear throw. With that, he propped himself up against a tree and the Nso' forces came to cut off his head.

When certain of the principal Nso' came to the scene and recognized the King, they said, "If we had known it was the King, we would not have killed him, because one never kills the king in a battle." When informed about the incident, the Fon of Nso' (Sébum II, b. La'ngam) wept a lot, saying, "Is not the King of the Pamom my brother who came from Rifum?" Then he gave a grave-cloth to wrap round the king who was buried in Nku Nso' (Kimbo', the capital of Nso'). Thereafter, he killed the man who had killed the King saying, "Why did he kill my brother?" For their part, some of the leading Nso' said, "In a thousand years the country of Nso' will be conquered, the child will die, the old man will die, the woman will die." The Fon of Nso' then replied, "If that is the case, I am here for nothing [wasting my time and efforts, or worthless]. It was the Pamom who came from their country with this affair."<sup>5</sup>

We find this royal version of Mum tendentious for many reasons. First, Njoya used it to establish his importance and identity. It is no mean feat to be the brother-king of the Fon of Nso', the most powerful King in the section of Kamerun which the British administered from 1922 to 1961, and an alleged descendant of the King of Rifém, the cradle of Tikar cum Ndobbo civilization, the most admired and dominant civilization in the Central Grassfields of Cameroon. The statement "Is not the King of the Pamom my brother who came from Rifum?" attributed to the Fon of Nso' by Njoya was intended to establish this importance and identity. To grasp this point in its proper perspective, it is important to note that the most powerful *fon*doms and chiefdoms in the Central Grassfields of Cameroon, those which claim to be of either Tikar or Ndobbo origin, have from time immemorial sought to identify themselves with the Rifém cradle in their search for importance and identity. Second, Njoya used this version to exonerate and excuse his brother-Fon from Rifém from the hideous crime of killing a Fon in battle, forbidden by one of his "Laws of Rifum." This is why the Fon of Nso' is alleged to have wept

<sup>5</sup>For variants of this abridged version, see Jeffreys (1946:57-8) and Mzeka (1990:71-2). It is important to note that, in this version, Njoya admits that his father was decapitated by a Nso' warrior. This admission runs contrary to a recent claim put forward in a conversation with us by two Mum princes, whose names we are withholding, namely, that Nsa'ngu was beheaded by a Mum warrior on his request. In our view, this recent claim is intended to deny the Nso' the credit for slaying the Fon of Mum in battle, and to reinforce the questionable view, held by two Mum princes, Nsa'ngu's great-grandsons, whose names we are withholding, that Nsa'ngu went to war determined to die with his brother-rivals in order to secure the Mum throne for his son, Njoya. This view is unconvincing to us because it was by no means certain that Nsa'ngu's brother-rivals, Njikam and Milliom, would perish in war or that they had the same determination or desire to die in war as that of Nsa'ngu. Nor was war the only or the best means by which Nsa'ngu could eliminate his rivals.

profusely when informed about the mishap, to have treated and buried the royal corpse with respect, and to have executed Nsa'ngu's slayer for killing his brother-Fon. Third, he used the version to put forward the unconvincing view, which his grandson has accepted, that his father went to war determined to die in order to secure the throne for him. This is why he alleged that Nsa'ngu refused to withdraw from combat when his forces pleaded with him to do so and, instead, encouraged his brave soldiers to fight with him to the last man. It is also why he alleged that his father continued to fight after he had exhausted his spears and was left only with seven warriors at his side. In our view, this is little more than a postmortem rationalization of or excuse for the decisive defeat the Mum suffered in the hands of the Nso'. Finally, Njoya used the version to exonerate and excuse himself and the Mum forces from the atrocities they committed in Nso' as auxiliaries of the German forces during the Nso'-German War of 1906. In that capacity, they slaughtered everything that moved in front of them in Nso'—pregnant women, women and old men, children of both sexes, animals and birds—and burnt down part of the capital and all the villages through which they passed. In order to exonerate and excuse himself and his forces from these barbaric acts, Njoya decided to make them prophetic and to blame the Nso' for inviting the wrath of the gods who duly punished them for breaking one of the "Laws of Rifum" by killing a king in battle. This is why he alleged that Nso' elders prophesied that "In a thousand years the country of Nso' will be conquered, the child will die, the old man will die, and the woman will die," and so they did and the country of Nso' was conquered and burnt down because the Nso' killed a king in battle which was forbidden by a "Law of Rifum."

The second and last version emanating from Mum is that which Jeffreys (1946:59) has referred to as the "Popular Bamum Account." It runs as follows. During the Nso'-German War of 1906, the Mum assisted the Germans and their Fon, Njoya, burnt Kimbo', the capital of Nso'. While the palace was in flames, a former Nso' slave acquired from Mum, Ndam Bansa',<sup>6</sup> who had become a soldier under the Germans and knew the whereabouts of the royal skull of Mum, recovered a skull and declared it to be Nsa'ngu's. As a result, he became the *Manshuat Paiyegh* (the intermediary between the Mum and the Europeans) and was raised to the rank of Titamfon No. 3. This rank obliged him to shave the Fon's face every Friday and, with the other Titamfons, regularly ensure the welfare of royal wives in return for handsome rewards every Friday (Jeffreys 1946:59-60).

This account does not say how a slave could have knowledge of the whereabouts of Nsa'ngu's skull in a society where first generation slaves, the real slaves there were, had virtually no access to the palace (Chem-Langhee 1995:180, 182). This is however besides the point. The real point hovers around the claim that Nsa'ngu's head was recovered by a former slave of Mum origin in the early days of the Nso'-

German War. We detect in this claim the desire of the Mum to deny the Germans the credit for recovering the skull for them and to establish the unwarranted view that they themselves recovered the royal skull from the Nso' in battle as it was taken in battle. This in our view is an indication of their search for importance since the fact that their royal skull was recovered for them by foreigners would belittle them. Also significant is the claim that the social status of Ndam Bansa' was raised and he was assigned important duties which earned for him handsome rewards every Friday because he recovered the royal skull from Nso'. This underlines the importance of the royal skull to the Mum, in the same way as it was to the Nso'.

#### Versions of Nso' Origin

The first version from Nso' to be considered is royal in character. It is that of Mbiñkar Mbiñlo (Biñlo), son of Sémbum II in whose reign Nsa'ngu's head was taken, who witnessed the events surrounding Nsa'ngu's head, became Jeffreys' informant, and later mounted the throne of Nso' in 1947 as Sémbum III. According to him, Nsa'ngu was beheaded by a member of the Sov lineage, a fugitive lineage in Nso'. For that reason, the Fon of Nso' raised the lineage head of Sov to the rank of *kibay* (state councillor and Fon's counsellor with the title *shuufaay* or *faay kibay*—great lord). When the Fon of Nso' received Nsa'ngu's head, he had it cleaned, rubbed in camwood, wrapped in a highly valued Wukari cloth, and kept in a bag in his private apartments. On the other hand, skulls of the other slain Mum were used to decorate the 2 *manjoñ* (military establishment) houses. The Fon of Nso' then sent 2 messengers, bearing the conventional emblems of a peace mission, the *kikeñ* and a royal spear with a bent tip, to Fumban, the capital of Mum, to say that it was wrong for brother to fight brother, and that he would return Nsa'ngu's head if peace were restored. The 2 emissaries arrived and delivered their message safely. But, on their return journey, they were attacked at the Nso'-Mum boundary on the Monyi River by the Mum who, ignoring the peace emblems, cut off their entire pudenda and let them go. They struggled and reached Kobi in Nso' where they died and were buried. Consequently, Sémbum II retained Nsa'ngu's head. When Kimbo' was sacked, looted and burnt during the Nso'-German War of 1906 in which the Mum assisted the Germans, Sémbum II escaped with Nsa'ngu's head to Dzeñ in Nso', while the Germans sent home the Mum only after 5 days of fighting because of the atrocities they were committing. After 6 months of warfare, Sémbum II called for peace and had to surrender Nsa'ngu's skull to the Germans as a condition of peace. This he did through Shuufaay Ndzeéndzévtsén in whose compound the German Officer was residing. The German Officer received the royal skull in the morning and by the afternoon he was on his way with it to Fumban (Jeffreys 1946:60).

In our view, like Njoya, Mbiñkar Mbiñlo, who had his eyes fixed on the Nso' throne which he mounted in 1947, used this version tendentiously in several ways. First, he used it to establish his importance and identity. To be the son of Sémbum II, the alleged brother of the very powerful Fon of Mum, whose ancestors are alleged to have come from

<sup>6</sup>Bansa' is one of the corrupted forms of Nso'.

the royal house of Rifém, the cradle of Tikar cum Ndobbo civilization, gave him both importance and an identity. That is why it was wrong for “brother to fight brother.” Second, he used the version to exonerate and excuse his father for retaining his “brother’s” head until forced by the Germans to release it. That is why Sémbum II is alleged to have retained Nsa’ngu’s head only after his peace overtures had ended in disaster. Finally, he used it to cover-up the fact that his father humiliatingly capitulated to the Germans twice—surrendering in war and releasing Nsa’ngu’s head under duress. That is why his father is said to have surrendered Nsa’ngu’s skull to the Germans through Shuufaay Ndzééndzévtsén and not directly.

This last point must be understood within its traditional context. The head of any royal game—buffalo, elephant, lion (which is hardly ever consciously killed because it is alleged to be the Fon himself) and python—is Shuufaay Ndzééndzévtsén’s customary share of the carcass. Sémbum II thus handed over to Shuufaay Ndzééndzévtsén the latter’s normal share of the royal game, the head of the lion or Fon of Mum, and it was left for him to dispose of it at will. It was thus Shuufaay Ndzééndzévtsén who decided to give to the Germans his own normal share of the royal game. This means that Sémbum II did not surrender the royal skull to the Germans and did not thus suffer the double humiliation of going in for peace and surrendering Nsa’ngu’s head to the Germans under duress.

If Mbiñkar Mbiñglo used his version tendentiously, Shuufaay Sov fared no better. According to him, when Nsa’ngu was beheaded by a member of the Sov lineage, his skull and some of those of the other slain Mum people were brought to Sov and rolled on the ground. Nsa’ngu’s personal page, who had a European gun when he was captured, was then invited to identify Nsa’ngu’s head from among those lying on the ground. When he did so, Shuufaay Sov’s father, Shaañ,<sup>7</sup> sprinkled good camwood on it, put it in a new bag on which he affixed a red feather, and took it to the Fon in Kimbo’, where the news of the decapitation was already known. As soon as he arrived, the Fon asked for his white cap and white clothes which he wore to denote that he was mourning for his brother (Nsa’ngu). He also went to the Ba’ House (headquarters of the southern military sector) where he rebuked the Ba’ forces for killing Nsa’ngu, and informed them that they would take back Nsa’ngu’s skull to Mum. He did so in order to forestall any inclination to boasting or headiness by the Sov lineage on account of their achievement. When he returned from the Ba’ House to the palace, *ñweroñ* (orchestra of the regulatory society made up mainly of retainers) began to mourn for Nsa’ngu, and the *nsii* (dance of heroes) was staged. After the dance, the Fon entertained the dancers with palm wine and the warriors rubbed the royal skull with camwood and gave it to the Fon to store in the palace. To crown it all, the Fon decorated Faay Sov, who had taken credit for the decapitation since it was a member of his

lineage who had done the job, with a *mbaañguu* (feathered staff).

Shuufaay Sov has, in this idyllic account, clearly personalized the event in his search for importance and identity. With regard to the issue of the search for importance, he made it clear (and accurately) that Nsa’ngu was beheaded by a member of his lineage. This was no mean feat since, in the Central Grassfields of the time, the capture or death of any Fon or chief in battle ended the war in favour of those who captured or killed the king. Thus, albeit the Nso’-Mum War was virtually ended by the time Nsa’ngu was beheaded, the Sov lineage claimed, and continue to claim, greater credit for bringing the war to a successful conclusion on the side of the Nso’. Shuufaay Sov also underlined this point by alleging that the royal skull was brought first to and identified in his compound, that it was his father (actually grandfather) who took it to the Fon, that his father was decorated with a feathered staff for that act, and that the Fon was at pains to forestall any inclination to pride and headiness by him and his lineage on account of their achievement. Shuufaay Sov also used these allegations to underscore the fact that he was now an integral part of Nso’, a part and parcel of the Nso’ society, rather than a fugitive and immigrant from Nsob in the Nkambe or Ntem area to the northeast of Nso’. This thus identified him with the two “brotherly” *fon*doms of Nso’ and Mum with their enhanced identity as the alleged descendants of the royal house of Rifém, the cradle of Tikar cum Ndobbo civilization. To stress the “brotherly” link between the dynasties of Nso’ and Mum, and the importance of Nsa’ngu, his Fon’s “brother”, he alleged that the Fon asked for his white cap and clothes (recent symbol of mourning in Nso’) to mourn for his “brother” while *ñweroñ* mourned for Nsa’ngu and the *nsii* dance of heroes was staged in Nsa’ngu’s behalf (by those who had slain him).

This brings us to the version of Faay Mum (now Shuufaay Mum), whose father emigrated to Nso’ from Mum with over twenty followers shortly before the outbreak of the last Nso’-Mum War. According to him, he learnt that Nsa’ngu was slain by a member of the Sov lineage.<sup>8</sup> But, it was his father whom the Fon invited to identify Nsa’ngu’s head in the palace. When he did so, the Fon and his *vibay* (state councillors, Fon’s counsellors) began to lament saying,

<sup>8</sup>There is as yet no agreement as to who actually slew Nsa’ngu. Mzeka (1970:71) says it was Kpukav, a man from Sov. Shuufaay Sov informed Jeffreys (1946:58) that it was Bukap (Buuakav) and, in 1958, he informed Kaberry that Kpukaf (Kpukav) was his ancestor who took Nsa’ngu’s head to the Fon (not necessarily who slew Nsa’ngu). Mfoome Gham informed that Ñgvényuy speared and finished Nsa’ngu after a man from Kiyán (in his own military sector, the northern sector) had shot him with a gun (a clear search for importance on the part of the informant who, as commander of the northern military sector, now wants to take credit for disabling Nsa’ngu first). This suggests that it was Faay Sov of the time, Kpukav, who slew Nsa’ngu since Ñgvényuy (God’s fowl) is the second eponym (the first is Fonlon) which Faay Sov acquired because it was he who took the white feathered cap which Nsa’ngu wore on the battlefield to the Fon. The grandson of Kpukav or Faay Sov, Taakom Ndzéma’, said that his grandfather, Ñgvényuy, contracted leprosy before his death because he slew Nsa’ngu. What is certain is that Kpukav was Faay Sov at the time of the war and could not therefore have slain Nsa’ngu himself.

<sup>7</sup>At the time of the war, Faay Sov was Kpukav whom Shaañ succeeded and was many years later raised to the rank of *kibay* with the title *shuufaay*.

"Alas, our brother has been killed."

To be personally known by the Fon in Nso' and to be called upon by him to perform an important duty is an index of importance and prestige. Thus, in his search for importance and prestige, Faay Mum alleged that the Fon personally knew his father whom he invited to identify Nsa'ngu's head, an important duty at the time. He also set out, in his own version, to reassert the alleged consanguineous link between the Nso' and the Mum and the "brotherly" relation between the two dynasties. That is why the Fon and his *vibay* are said to have lamented the death of their "brother." This "brotherliness" of the two *fondoms* also endowed Faay Mum with an assuring identity since he could easily identify himself with the two groups.

We will now turn our attention to the version put forward by Mfoome Ba', the commander of the southern military sector in which the war took place. According to him, N̄gwelem was Nsa'ngu whose skull was wrapped in a *kilaïlai* (blue and white stenciled royal cloth) so as to prevent women and people from seeing it. N̄gwelem was brought to the public once every year in the dry season for the *maleri* dance. But, when Nsa'ngu's head (which N̄gwelem wore) had to be returned to the Mum, each Mfoome received a bearded face *siri* (single gong) in the image of Nsa'ngu's head as a *kisécém* (symbol) of N̄gwelem, which was also wrapped in a *kilaïlai*. Whenever the Mfoome struck the *siri*, to denote a serious matter, all men went to the scene where it was struck and not to the Fon.

To equate N̄gwelem, who was displayed once a year to the festive *maleri* dancers, to Nsa'ngu, whom the Nso' beheaded in battle, as Mfoome Ba' has done, is to continually assert the superiority of the Nso' over the Mum in the context of warfare. Mfoome Ba' thus used this version to show that the Nso' were more important than the Mum when it came to warfare and, since the decapitation was done in his own military sector and by a warrior under his command, he was more important than Mfoome Gham as far as this war was concerned. He also underlined this search for importance when he alleged that each Mfoome received the symbol of Nsa'ngu's head before it was restored to the Mum: the symbol continually reminded the Amfoome (pl. of Mfoome) and the rest of the Nso' of their superiority over the Mum in battle. Finally, he underscored his search for personal importance when he stressed that, whenever the Mfoome struck the *siri*, people went to him and not to the Fon, the head of the military establishment and, indeed, of everything in Nso'.

The version of Mfoome Ba' is also significant in another respect. Before the Germans came to the scene, the Nso' had an annual dance, *maleri*, which they imported from Bali Kumbat, with whom they were in friendship but not in alliance. During this dance, which was staged in the dry season amidst great festivities, N̄gwelem, a wooden carving of a bearded male figure, with images of a scabbard on the body and a cutlass in the hand, wearing a real human skull, was presented to the jubilant dancers. Some Nso' people held that the human skull was that of a Mum prince killed

in battle, while others asserted that it was Nsa'ngu's. There is every reason to believe that this was the skull the Germans recovered for the Mum (See Jeffreys 1946:60-2 and the version of Mfoome Ba' above). This raises the important question as to whether the skull the Germans recovered for the Mum was that of Nsa'ngu or of a Mum prince. This issue is particularly important because, to this day, some people in Nso' are still convinced that Nsa'ngu's head, cap, scabbard and cutlass have not yet been restored, despite some of the convincing evidence before us to the contrary, and some of Kaberry's informants, as we shall see presently, indicated that the Nso' had planned to return but a false head. Nkwi has recently added to the confusion and uncertainty with his grossly misleading statement that "Nsangu's head was only returned to Bamum country after the independence and unification of the two Cameroons" (Nkwi and Warnier 1982:136). While all this is besides the point, it should serve as a warning to us that the creation of more myths about Nsa'ngu's head is not yet at an end.

This brings us to the issue of restoration. With regard to this issue, Faay (now Shuufaay) Tsén̄nkar said he was informed that the Fon handed over Nsa'ngu's skull (to the Germans) the day he came in (from the battlefield to personally surrender in Kimbo'). He added that he did not know of any attempt to trick the Germans with a false head. For his part, Michael Yenwo explained that the Fon first sent Faay Taañkumkuy to see the Germans in Kimbo', but the Germans insisted that all would be well if the Fon came himself. When the Fon arrived, the first thing the Germans demanded was Nsa'ngu's head. This he delivered while the Germans were still in Kimbo'. According to Shuufaay Sov, who confirmed the German account of the restoration of Nsa'ngu's head (see Jeffreys 1946:60-2) rehearsed to him by Kaberry in another interview, the Nso' had planned to return a false head when the Germans first asked for Nsa'ngu's head. He added that the real skull was kept in a special place and honoured by the Fon. According to Shuufaay Kooñgir, Nsa'ngu's head was handed over to the Germans at Ndzécéndzévtsén in Kimbo'. However, when the Germans asked for it, the Fon sent someone else's at first, which the Germans smelt and declared false. The Fon then produced a second one which was old and had hair on it, preserved in camwood. It was brought secretly at night from where it was kept because children and ordinary people could not see it. This the Germans pronounced genuine. When Kaberry raised the issue of smelling he averred that perhaps the head of a Fon smells differently from that of ordinary people.

We do not know to what extent Faay Tsén̄nkar's statement that he did not know of any attempt to trick the Germans with a false head was genuine. If it was not, and there was actually such an attempt, then he was involved in an over-put for whatever purpose. We do not also know to what extent the statement made by Shuufaay Sov and Shuufaay Kooñgir individually to the effect that the Nso' tried to trick the Germans with a false head was genuine. If it was not, we are at a loss as to whether or not they put that falsehood forward in order to present the Nso' as a group of clever

people in the search for prestige or importance. If it was, then the Nso' must have tried to do so in order to retain the real head that reminded them of their importance and superiority over the Mum in the issue of warfare. Equally significant, although somehow beside the point, is the allegation that the genuine skull was secretly brought at night from where it was kept because children and ordinary people could not see it. If children and ordinary people could not see it, was the human skull which N̄gwelem bore during the *maleri* dance and which was eventually restored to the Mum really that of Nsa'ngu? We raise this question because, in Nso', children, women, princes, princesses and retainers, all of whom are not allowed to view the royal corpse, any part of it, were not excluded from the *maleri* dance during which that skull was displayed. What we are suggesting is that Mfoome Ba' and Shuufaay Kooñgir might have put forward this claim in their search for importance or prestige since they were allowed to view Nsa'ngu's skull, a thing forbidden to children and ordinary people.

Whatever the case, we will now turn our attention to the last account to be considered, that of Mfoome Gham, the commander of the northern sector of the military establishment. According to Mfoome Gham, Nsa'ngu's head could not be stored in the palace because it was the head of the Fon's brother. It was kept in a secret cave in the bush near the headwaters of the Buy (Bui) and Mbim streams at Taashibii in the charge of Faay Kinteñ, 'Taakwa', a former *ushiylav faay* (Fon's personal page). This custodian of the royal skull received camwood from the Fon on a monthly basis to rub on it. When Sémbum II surrendered to the Germans at Ndžééndžévtésén, the Germans demanded only Nsa'ngu's head. Since the palace had been cleaned and many things destroyed, the Fon said he might not be able to find it. However, Shuufaay Ndžééndžév (the primus of the great lords, not to be confused with Shuufaay Ndžééndžévtésén) requested Faay Faanjañ, whom the Fon had identified to the Germans as his only trusted messenger, to look for the bag containing the royal head. Faay Faanjañ then selected people who went and brought it from Taashibii at night. The Fon then asked Faay Faanjañ to show it to the German Officers. The lowest of them in rank smelt it and said it was not genuine. The people insisted that it was and the senior Office smelt it and confirmed its authenticity. The war thus ended and the German Officers called for the Mum who confirmed the genuineness of the royal skull when it was shown to them.<sup>9</sup>

As can be seen, Mfoome Gham was at pains in this version to reassert the "brotherly" link between the Nso' and Mum dynasties. This is why he alleged that Nsa'ngu's head could not be kept in the palace because it was the head of the Fon's brother. He thus used this version to establish the identity of the Fon of Nso', the "brother" of the Fon of Mum, the alleged descendant of the royal house of Rifém, the cradle of Tikar cum Ndobbo civilization. He was also at pains to allege that the royal skull was in the charge of a

<sup>9</sup>For a detail description of how the German Officer, Lieutenant von Wenckstern, restored the royal skull to Njoya and his notables, see Jeffreys (1946:60-2).

former personal page of the Fon, which is what he was himself. This suggests that he wanted to establish the importance of the Fon's personal pages, a group to which he belonged, since they were not only known personally by the Fon but were also called upon to perform important national duties, such as that of keeping custody of the royal head.

### Conclusion

There is general agreement among the informants that Nsa'ngu's head was properly handled and treated in Nso' with the honour and respect befitting of a royal skull. There is also general agreement that the person who decapitated Nsa'ngu was a member of the Sov lineage, and that the Germans received the royal skull from the Nso' for its eventual transmission in Kimbo'. Beyond that, there is no further agreement. For example, the name of Nsa'ngu's slayer is given in one source as Bukap (Buukav) and in another as Kpukaf (Kpukav).<sup>10</sup> One source states that Nsa'ngu's skull was identified at Sov by a captured personal page of Nsa'ngu while another states that it was identified at the palace by Faay Mum. In some sources, Nso' elders are said to have greatly lamented the decapitation of Nsa'ngu which is alleged in others to have been rewarded with a decoration or promotion. According to some sources, the royal skull was kept in the Nso' palace whereas a source states that it was kept in the bush in a secret cave. Some sources claim that there was a secret plan in Nso' to return a fake head whereas one source claims ignorance of such a plan. The claim that the Germans were suspicious of the genuineness of the skull handed over to them is to be found in some sources but not in others. Mfoome Gham was alone in alleging that the Mum were invited by the Germans at Ndžééndžévtésén to ascertain the authenticity of the head.

Controversies, disagreements or discrepancies such as these are to be expected in oral history data collection. Some of them are products of faulty, illusional, confused or simply downright wrong memory. Some of them are a product of the desire of some informants to be dramatic or to personalize events for various reasons. Some result from the fact that some informants stress or inform only about part of the event which they observed or which had the greatest significance to them. Finally, although the list is by no means complete, some result from the desire of some informants to serve specific goals or interests.<sup>11</sup>

The desire of some informants to personalize events in order to serve specific goals or interests is the dominant oral history problem surrounding Nsa'ngu's head. Thus, the royal informants, King Njoya and Prince Mbiñkar Mbiñlo, used the occasion to establish their identity and importance and to make excuses for or cover-up some unbecoming behaviour. Mfoome Ba', Shuufaay Sov and Jeffreys'

<sup>10</sup>Bukap (Buukav, lit. lack of wealth) and kpukaf (kpukav, lit. die for wealth) might refer to one and the same person or name, as the problem might be that of pronunciation in oral transmission.

<sup>11</sup>For elaborate discussions of some of these problems, see Grele (1978:43), Moore (1978:1), Joyner (1979:51), and Jensen (1981:14).

informants on the popular version of Mum went out in search of personal or group importance. Shuufaay Sov and Faay Mum used the occasion to assert their identity and the brotherly link between the Nso' and the Mum kingdoms to which they belonged. We suspect that Faay Tséñkar, Shuufaay Kooñgir and Shuufaay Sov were engaged in making some excuses or in some cover-ups in their view that the Nso' planned to trick the Germans with a fake head. Finally, Mfoome Gham used the occasion to establish the "brotherly" link between the Nso' and Mum dynasties, and to signify the importance of the personal pages of the Fon, a group to which he belonged. The past was thus mythicized for these various reasons. This notwithstanding, the kernel of the historical event remains intact: during the last Nso'-Mum War, Nsa'ngu's head was cut off in battle, properly handled and treated with honour and respect in Nso', and eventually restored to the Mum through the Germans who obliged the Nso' to do so.

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### B. Oral Sources

These very old or elderly knowledgeable or strategically well-placed Nso' informants were interviewed by Phyllis M. Kaberry and Elizabeth M. Chilver in 1958, 1960 or 1963. They are presented here in their alphabetical order.

Faay Mum. Son and successor to Faay Mum who emigrated to Nso' from Mum with over twenty followers shortly before the Nso'-Mum War, and whose son claimed identified Nsa'ngu's head for the Fon of Nso' in the Nso' palace.

Faay Tséñkar. A lord whose compound is very near the palace and who, in the past, kept custody of the property of *ñweron* (regulatory society).

Mfoome Ba' (John N'goo). Personal page of Shuufaay Ndzééndzév (the primus of the leading seven state councillors) and Commander of the Ba' (Southern) Sector of the military establishment.

Mfoome Gham (Ibrahim Bamujo). Fon's personal page and Commander of the Gham (Northern) Sector of the military establishment.

Sébum III (Fon of Nso', 9 April 1947-29 January 1972) who, as a boy of below fighting age, is said to have accompanied his father, Sébum II (d.1907), to view the war from a hilltop at Yer, about ten kilometres from Kimbo', and to have been present when Nsa'ngu's head was handed over to the Germans at Ndzééndzévtsén.

Shuufaay Kooñgir. A great lord of death or of sacrifice and thus priest of the royal burial charged with reconciliatory functions and mortuary embassies.

Shuufaay Sov. A great lord and state councillor whose lineage member is said to have decapitated Nsa'ngu and whose predecessor is said to have been decorated and promoted to the rank of state councillor as reward for the decapitation of Nsa'ngu.

Shuufaay Taañikum. The second in protocol among the seven leading great lords and state councillors.

Taakom Ndzéma'. The grandson of Faay Sov, Kpukav, who was the lineage head of Sov at the time of the Nso'-Mum War in question.

Yenwo, Michael. A former *ñweron*'s page of repute, resident in Nkar, the main battlefield of the war.

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