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Towards the decipherment of the Bagam script

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Zusammenfassung

Die Bagam (Eghap) Schrift aus der Region Grassfields in Kamerun wird kurz analysiert. Es wird versucht, die Lautwerte einiger Bagam Buchstaben zu bestimmen und Ähnlichkeiten mit der Bamum-Schrift herauszustellen.

Abstract

The Bagam (Eghap) script from the Grassfields region of Cameroon is briefly analyzed. An attempt to identify the phonetic values of some Bagam characters is made and some similarity with the Bamum script is reported.

Résumé

L'écriture de Bagam (Eghap) de la Province de l'Ouest du Cameroun est brièvement analysée. Une tentative d'identifier les valeurs phonétiques de quelques caractères de Bagam est faite et une certaine similitude avec l'écriture de Bamum est rapportée.

1. Introduction

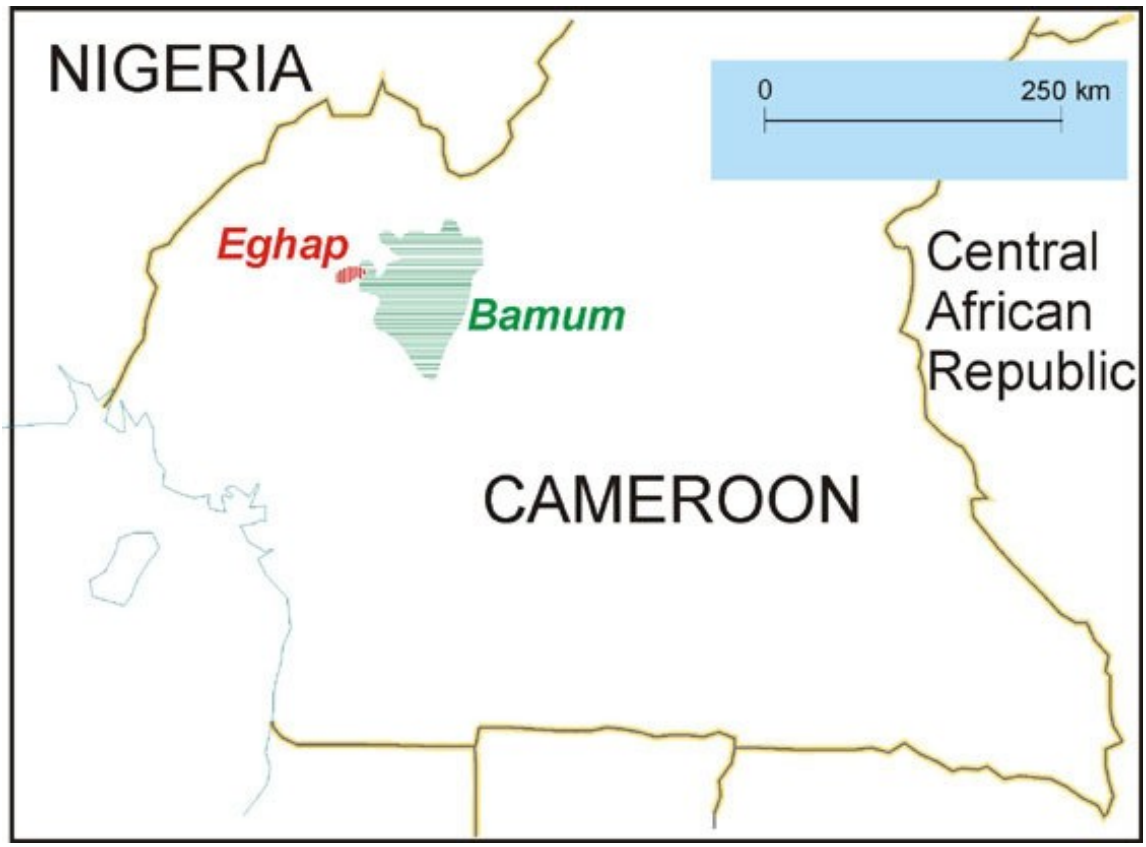
<1>

A decade ago, Konrad Tuchscherer published the paper entitled *The Lost Script of the Bagam* (Tuchscherer 1999). In this article, the light was shed for the first time ever on this mysterious script known since the 1920s when a British military officer Louis William Gordon Malcolm learned about it during his stay in Cameroon and submitted the relevant information for the publication in the *Journal of African Society* (Malcolm 1921). Unfortunately, Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston, the editor of the journal, decided not to publish the list of script signs. The character shapes remained thus unknown for more than seventy years until Tuchscherer discovered the manuscript of Malcolm's M. Sc. thesis with the list of characters attached. The story of this discovery is a kind of a detective novel. The Bagam script was discussed in various works in connection with the Bamum script, in particular by Alfred Schmitt (1963) but no author managed to observe any Bagam characters *de visu*, which caused David Dalby's reference "the lost script of the Bagam" (Dalby 1986: 15; Tuchscherer 1999: 59). It was Konrad Tuchscherer who finally succeeded in locating Malcolm's unpublished master's thesis in the Haddon Library of Archeology and Anthropology at Cambridge.

<2>

The Bagam script was used to write the Mengaka language spoken by over 20 thousand people in the Western Province of Cameroon, Grassfields region, in Bagam, a town located seventy kilometers westward from Foumban, the center of former Bamum kingdom (see Fig. 1). This language belongs to the Bantoid branch of the Niger-Congo family. Its alternative names include Ghap, Benzing or Megaka. *Bagam* is how the outsiders call these people, while they call themselves *Eghap* (Gordon 2005).

Figure 1: Map showing the location of the Bamum and Eghap people.



2. The Bagam Script

2.1. Script history

<3>

The Bagam script originated ca. 1910, probably under some influence from the neighboring Bamum script. According to oral tradition, it was created by a local king (*fon*), Pufong, assisted by a royal retainer Nde Temfong (Tuchscherer 2005; 2007).

<4>

The script was used for record-keeping and for farming calendars, and probably for private correspondence as well. It is not likely, however, that the script had ever gained a wide currency among the Eghap people.

2.2. Script inventory

<5>

Data about the Bagam script are rather scarce. No script material has been identified so far except the manuscript from the Haddon Library of the Cambridge University deposited by Malcolm. Fortunately, from these data published by Tuchscherer one can proceed in the identification of the values for a significant part of the Bagam characters.

<6>

The number of recorded characters in the Bagam script exceeds one hundred, and in total could probably reach several hundreds.

<7>
Two types of characters can be distinguished. For convenience, they will be called in the following *ideographic* and *phonetic* as these names reflect the nature of the character usage in given samples. It seems reasonable to suggest that the ideographic (full-word) signs are "native" (cf. discussion on numbers below) while the phonetic ones are borrowed from Bamum. Such a two-fold nature of symbols was noted yet by Malcolm's informant who said "*that when the latter [Bagam script] breaks down the signs are borrowed from that of the former [Bamum script]"* (Malcolm 1921: 128). The fact that phonetic, not ideographic, symbols are borrowed appears a bit unusual since in mixed-type writing systems generally these are heterograms (graphs borrowed from another language, Sims-Williams 2004) which denote **stems**, cf. ancient cuneiforms (Coulmas 2004: 6, Sims-Williams 2004) or modern Japanese script (Coulmas 2004: 240-241).

<8>
The identification of the character values is far from being complete yet, in particular due to the inaccuracy of Malcolm's transcription. A comprehensive study of Malcolm's records together with cross-checking the respective dictionary entries of Mengaka could help in future to precise the presented results.

<9>
In the following tables the characters are ordered mostly according to their first appearance in Malcolm's records (as given by Tuchscherer 1999). Sometimes, this rule is not held and the first position where the identification is the least doubtful is used instead.

3. The symbol charts

<10>
Table 1 contains the list of ideographic symbols. One should note that Malcolm's transcriptions generally adhere to Johnston's scheme (Johnston 1919: 39-41). In particular, *y* following a consonant denotes the consonant palatalization (*gy*, *ky*), *ñ* is used to denote nasal *ŋ*, Greek gamma *γ* stands for velar *g* (Arabic غ), *q* represents the faucal *k* (Arabic ق), Greek omega *ω* stands for a kind of long *o* (French *au* or German *oh*). The macron (¯) marks stress, the caron (ˇ) does unstress, and accent is marked by the acute (´). The apostrophe was supposedly used by Malcolm for a glottal stop when between the vowels or to separate a prenasalizing *n* and *m* from the subsequent consonant. The notations are just retyped from a handwritten source, and in some places may be erroneous where the writing was not sufficiently clear.

<11>
For the charts, a computerized Bagam font typeface was designed by the present author.

Table 1: Ideographic symbols of the Bagam script.

no.	symbol	transcription	translation
1.		ti'i	a name
2.		m've	outside
3.		ū'ú	you
4.		a'a!	an exclamation
5.		gyie	to sleep
6.		hō'ōh	an exclamation
7.		i'i	it is so
8.		tungω	burn
9.		pa'ap	a grass bag
10.		muω	to show
11.		uñ	now
12.		n'de	[prefixed to attendant's name]
13.		uwát	cut
14.		shē	ground
15.		iya'a	sleep after labour
16.		tē	too much
17.		ohrǒ	frog
18.		lan	all's well
19.		ku'uñ	spear
20.		tē (tā)	father
21.		n'ga'a	a chief's stick
22.		ge'et	pass
23.		yu'ūh	compound
24.		iyu'ñ	verandah
25.		iɣu'uñ	chair
26.		idzi'i	we
27.		n'gá	no
28.		iyā'a	mine
29.		mω'ω	fire
30.		dzω'ω	meat
31.		n'tseh	water
32.		m'bē	denial
33.		ni'i	put
34.		n'dzoh	to see
35.		iyé	make
36.		mē	finish; complete

no.	symbol	transcription	translation
37.		sω	talk
38.		iɣǻt	to sit down
39.		tsω'ω	to take
40.		n'nω	palaver
41.		mē	mother
42.		nǿ	drink
43.		pǿ'ω	to clap the hands
44.		m'bέi	a tree (*Canarium schweinfurthii*)
45.		puω	arm
46.		n'dǻp	hut
47.		tsei	to pass
48.		ñgω	greatness
49.		nē	uneatable
50.		kyi'i	a runaway prisoner
51.		pi'i	all men
52.		iyǒñ	to beg; to request
53.		iyω	to beg
54.		fa'a	to give
55.		iza'a	a far-away road (??)
56.		foñ	chief
57.		ñka'a	drum
58.		n'nǻp	horse
59.		ūwa'a	to catch
60.		tiñgω	iron
61.		pi'i	camwood powder
62.		mi'i	knife
63.		t-sē	to stand up
64.		pep	spleen disease
65.		mē	weak
66.		nē	dirty water
67.		m'bú (m'bóp)	body
68.		ndzē	clothes
69.		kō	to ascend
70.		ku'up	pipe
71.		mω'ω	fire
72.		shī	ground

<12>
In Table 2, the numerical signs of the Bagam script are listed next to those of the Bamum script. One can note that there is no close resemblance in the shapes of these symbols.

<13>
The Bamum numerals are shown in several versions conventionally labeled A, B, C, …, G corresponding to the development stages of the script between 1896 and 1918 (Schmitt 1963). For comparison with the Bagam script, the stages up to F (and presumably after B) are relevant.

Table 2: Numerals in the Bagam script compared to the Bamum script.

Bagam script				Bamum script			
no.	Value	Symbol	transcription	A–D	E	F	G
73.	1		mωω				
74.	2		yc-pá				
75.	3		kyet				
76.	4		kúa				
77.	5		tañ				
78.	6		ntő				
79.	7		semba				
80.	8		fω'ω				
81.	9		pfω'ω				
82.	10		vūc				

Bamum numerals in the version G are typed using JG Bamum Akauku Arial typeface © Jason Glavy, 2006.

<14>
While certain similarity in the shapes of the Bagam and Bamum numerals can be observed, the fact that the difference between them is so significant can be treated as an evidence of a parallel development but not a direct borrowing of those symbols.

<15>
To cite a coworker of the present author, "numerals are devoid of soul" meaning they are less associated with a specific ethnicity, religion, etc., unlike letters proper, and thus can be more easily transmitted between various writing systems, cf. modern "western" digits which became a truly universal notation (Coulmas 2004: 361).

<16>
Another observation supporting the statement that the Bagam script was, at least in its ideographic part, an original invention (not excluding the 'stimulus diffusion' from the Bamum script) refers to the symbol shapes in general. The Bagam script is of a more cursive style; its symbols are less pictorial than those of the Bamum script at the relevant stages, cf. Fig. 2.

Figure 2: Selection of symbols from versions A–F of the Bamum script, according to Schmitt (1963)

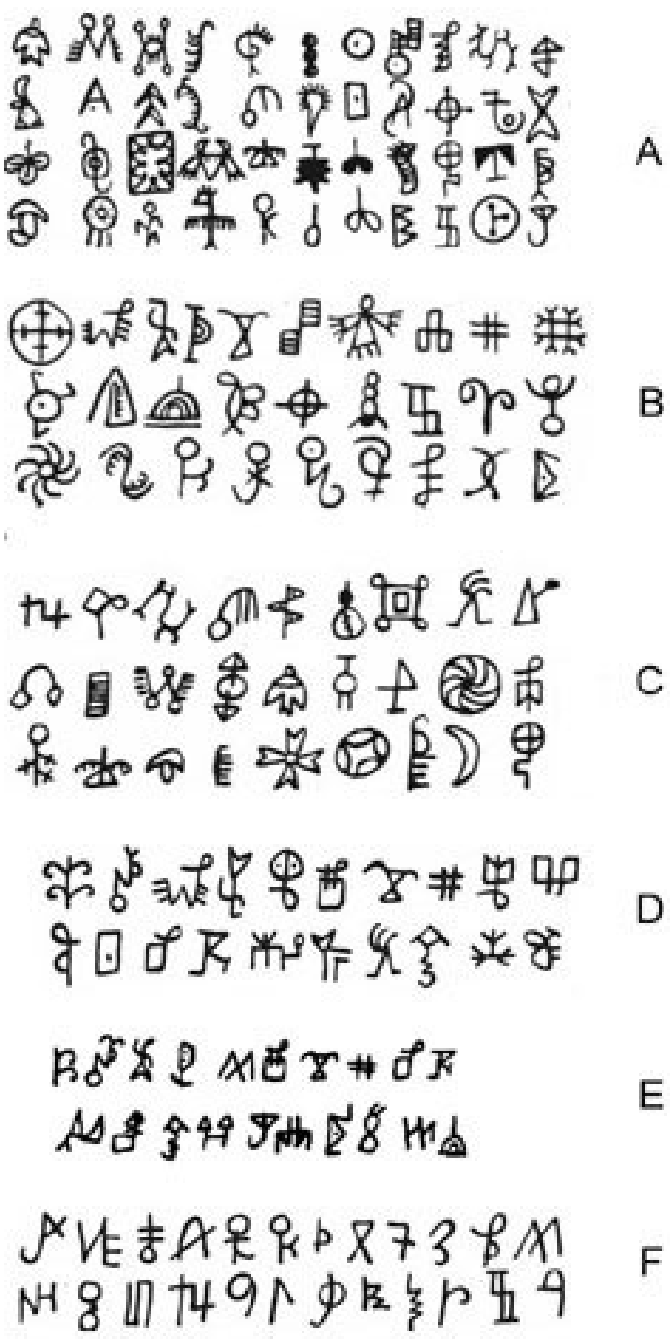


Table 3 contains phonetic symbols. The identification is much better for the consonantal part of syllables than for the vocalic one. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the pleonastic representations typical for the Bamum script, at least in the versions contemporary with the Bagam script (cf. Coulmas 2004: 38; Jensen 1969: 212-213). It seems thus safer to leave the vowel identification for future studies.

It is interesting to note some ligatures (№120, №136; probably also №169, №171, and №172).

Table 3: Phonetic symbols of the Bagam script.

no.	symbol	transcription
83.		??
84.		??
85.		-o
86.		ts-, dz-, dʒ-, s- (?? = №7)
87.		n-, (m-)
88.		ts-
89.		-a
90.		ts-
91.		-e, -i, ye, yi
92.		f(ω)-
93.		-p
94.		mw-
95.		ye
96.		m(e)-
97.		-i
98.		n-
99.		n(a)-
100.		-t
101.		ku-
102.		(m)b-
103.		-u
104.		-u
105.		t(u)-
106.		ñ-
107.		m(ii)-
108.		-i
109.		??
110.		??
111.		s-
112.		t-
113.		m(i)-
114.		k(i)-
115.		gy

no.	symbol	transcription
116.		??
117.		??
118.		??
119.		k-
120.		moñ
121.		m(o)-
122.		-i
123.		nd-
124.		??
125.		??
126.		dz-
127.		??
128.		ts-
129.		??
130.		ndz-, ndʒ-
131.		??
132.		(ñ)g-
133.		m(a)-
134.		??
135.		iy
136.		-op
137.		??
138.		-ñ
139.		hin
140.		??
141.		??
142.		??
143.		??
144.		??
145.		??
146.		f(a)-
147.		-a ?? = №59
148.		-a

no.	symbol	transcription
149.		-a
150.		-i
151.		s(i)-
152.		m(ω)-
153.		(ñ)ga- ?? = №27
154.		iy
155.		??
156.		k(a)-
157.		s(a)-
158.		??
159.		??
160.		??
161.		??
162.		??
163.		??
164.		??
165.		??
166.		k(a)-
167.		shi-
168.		ñ-
169.		kō
170.		??
171.		pi
172.		kōpi
173.		w(ω)- = №3
174.		-o = №6
175.		-p = №11
176.		(ñ)g/k- = №19
177.		gw- = №46
178.		n(e)- = № 49
179.		v/f- = №55
180.		l/r- = №67

Double question marks (??) denote places where the identification is ambiguous or impossible.

<17>
Finally, Table 4 lists symbols having similar shapes in the Bagam and Bamum scripts.

Table 4: Similar characters of the Bagam and Bamum scripts

Bagam			Bamum	
1		ti'i (name)		nɜəmli (*before names*)
46		n'dǎp		ü
177		gw-		
55		iza'a		fu
179		v/f-		
71		mω'ω		mu
72		shī		si
86		ts-, dz-, dʒ-, s-		sɯ
87		n-, (m-)		m
138		-ñ		
89		-a		a
91		-e, -i, ye, yi		ye
93		-p		pa
94		mw-		mɔ
121		m(o)-		
96		m(e)-		me
113		m(i)-		

Bagam			Bamum	
97		-i		i
99		n(a)-		na
101		ku-		ku
102		(m)b-		puə
104		-u		kpa*
105		t(u)-		tu
107		m(ii)-		mi
110		??		rɔ*
111		s-		sa
112		t-		tɔ
114		k(i)-		u*
130		ndz-, ndʒ-		ʃi*
133		m(a)-		ma
137		??		ɣɔ*
166		k(a)-		ka

The values of the latter are taken from Schmitt (1963), Tab.14. Asterisks (*) mark symbols of significantly different or unidentified values. The identification of *rɔ* is questionable as elsewhere Schmitt gives *puə* and even *sap* for the same shape in different versions.

<18>
Some questions are still waiting for an answer:

It is not clear if all the phonetic signs had an ideographic value, while certainly some ideographs were used phonetically (cf. №3 and №173; №6 and №174; №19 and №176; №27 and №153; №49 and №178).

It is not clear whether some slightly different shapes represent the same symbol (cf. №94 and №121; №96 and №113; №148 and №149; №164 and №165).

In some cases the phonetic correspondence between the Bagam script and the Bamum script is far from close (see asterisked entries in Table 4). Is this a consequence of mistakes in the transcription?

<19>
To summarize, the Bagam script is briefly described on the basis of material presented by Tuchscherer (1999). Within phonetic characters, the values of 66 symbols are identified to a different accuracy. For some 30 characters, a notable similarity with the Bamum script is observed.

<20>
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