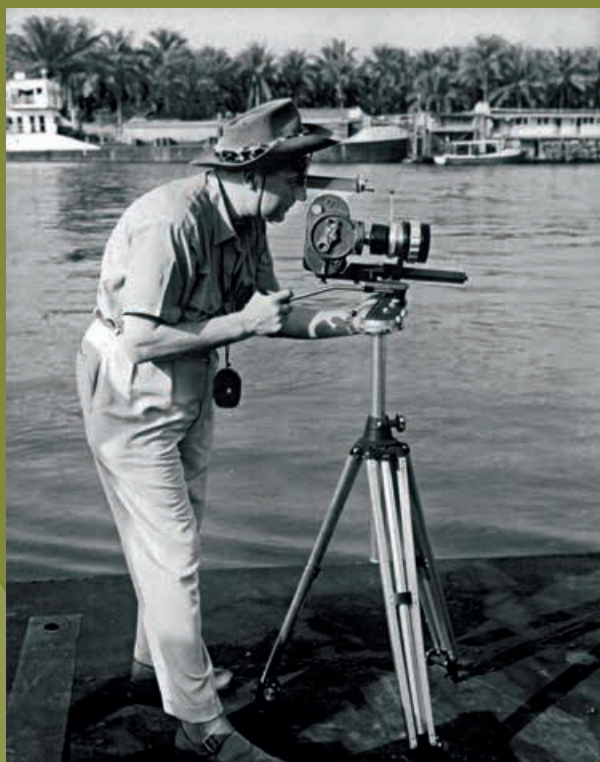


PETER LANG

# Africa's Last Romantic



THE FILMS, BOOKS AND EXPEDITIONS  
OF JOHN L. BROM

OLGA BROM SPENCER  
EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY GLENN REYNOLDS

*Africa's Last Romantic: The Films, Books and Expeditions of John L. Brom* captures the drama and excitement of John L. Brom's film expeditions from 1949 to 1962 through sub-Saharan Africa. Brom was the only explorer to follow the footsteps of Henry Morton Stanley and in a documentary interviewed the two last survivors of Stanley's expeditions from 1874 to 1890. In 1955 he also interviewed the famous nineteenth-century East African slave trader Tippu Tip's grandson, who defended his grandfather's trade. Brom's expedition was the basis for his bestseller *20,000 Miles in the African Jungle*, which was translated into eleven languages. Brom managed to interview and film the rulers and tribes he encountered before they were decimated in the civil wars of the Congo after independence, and his historic films are now preserved in the Human Studies Film Archives of the Smithsonian Institution. Over 500 articles were published on Brom's work on both sides of the Atlantic during his lifetime. *Africa's Last Romantic* is a useful addition to college courses in Third World cinema, cinema studies, and African history.

Olga Brom Spencer, Ph.D., a former faculty member at New York University, served as Executive Director of the Center for Family Development, Inc., in Westchester, New York, and the World Trade Center until her retirement. The focus of her studies was the family, women's changing roles and aging issues. She accompanied her first husband, Dr. John L. Brom to Africa on three occasions and used her African experiences in her books and articles. For her contribution to aging issues, she received a National Award to Seniors remitted in AARP headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Glenn Reynolds is Associate Professor of Non-Western History at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York. Graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, with a B.A. in political science, Reynolds earned a Ph.D. in history from SUNY-Stonybrook with a primary research agenda in African film studies and a specialty in colonial cinema. He is the editor of *Images out of Africa: The Virginia Garner Diaries of the Africa Motion Picture Project* (2011) and has published articles in the *Journal of Social History*, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, and the *South African Historical Journal*.

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Frankfurt · Berlin · Brussels · Vienna · Oxford

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John L. Brom with his custom-built 16mm Cinemascope camera on the Congo River, filming from the deck of the Baron Liebsbrecht

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## **Narrator's Acknowledgment**

Forty five years after my husband John L. Brom passed away, I received a telephone call from the Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian Institute informing me that a scholar screened their Brom's African documentaries and would like to interview me about my late husband's work.

The scholar, Professor Glenn Reynolds, well known for his expertise and publications in the field of Colonial Cinema in Africa, clarified during a subsequent meeting that the early period of filmmaking in Africa was inadequately documented, and stated his goal of filling this gap by providing accounts of surviving cineastes of this historic era.

Dr. Reynolds asked a direct question: could I remember and narrate the exploratory work of my late husband? John L. Brom was among the few filmmakers who captured the genuine tribal life of sub-Saharan Africa during the colonial era, before the independence period wiped out the ancient traditions and folklore.

Sixty five years after I accompanied my husband to Africa for the first time, I revisited his dusty archives and reviewed seven book describing his expeditions, in considering the cooperation with Dr. Reynolds. I was able to organize Brom's several expeditions into chronological sequences and narrated his work of 15 years. However, it was Dr. Reynolds's extensive knowledge of African history in general, and of colonial filmmaking in particular, that filled the gaps with historical details that completed the tapestry of the manuscript.

My cooperation on Africa's Last Romanite was motivated by a wish to pay tribute to Brom for his significant contribution to African documentary films. His work, travels, and achievements are now recorded for future generations of students of cinematography. I am pleased that the credit for this publication goes to Dr. Reynolds—without his vision, initiative, editing and dedication to the history of colonial cinematography in Africa, this book would not exist.

Dr. Olga Brom Spencer  
June 2013

## Editor's Acknowledgment

This book is the happy outcome of my productive collaboration with Dr. Olga Brom Spencer over the last few years. After our first meeting in the spring of 2012, we determined that we both had an abiding interest in publishing a lasting testament to the work of John L. Brom. Our focus naturally derived from rather different circumstances: I came from the discipline of Colonial Cinema in Africa, while Dr. Spencer had accompanied her husband to Africa and thus possessed rare insight into the expeditions and mindset of her late husband. But if our backgrounds were different, nonetheless we had a coming-together-of-the-minds in our desire to make available to the broader world the results of the collaboration between us. The result is this striking memoir, narrated by Dr. Spencer, of John Brom's films, books and expeditions relating to his experiences in Africa between 1949 and 1962. My introduction situates Brom in the broader historical context of colonial cinema, but itself would not have been possible without the valuable input of Dr. Spencer who helped clarify several important points regarding Brom's personality and aspirations.

I would also like to thank the Human Studies Film Archives located at the Smithsonian Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland, an institution devoted to the historical preservation of anthropological moving images. Director Mark White and archivists Pam Wintle, Daisy Njoku and the rest of the museum staff have facilitated access to the collection of John L. Brom and have played a pivotal role in helping to realize this project.

Brett Bondar from Mount Saint Mary College has played a very different, but equally important role as copyeditor, helping to convert this manuscript from a rough computer file into the required Peter Lang template. Finally, I would like to thank the editors and staff members at Peter Lang, especially Heidi Burns in acquisitions who showed an interest in our project from the beginning and answered our many questions, however tedious.

The result of these many collaborations and relationships is *Africa's Last Romantic: The Films, Books and Expeditions of John L. Brom*.

Dr. Glenn Reynolds  
August 2013



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## Introduction: Africa's Last Romantic

### The Beckoning Land

The 'golden' era of European filmmaking in colonial Africa extended from about 1910 to 1960, as a result of increasing interest in the industrialized West in exotic images from distant countries. Following World War Two, Equatorial Africa in particular was a site targeted by filmmakers from all over the world to compete for something new and sensational. There was one European explorer, author and cineaste of the continent who remained fascinated by the fast-disappearing Africa of old, and who worked tirelessly to catalogue its many unique cultures undergoing rapid transition. John L. Brom, heralded for numerous treks through some of the most remote areas of the continent between 1949 and 1962, was in many ways a man born a century too late. Having read in his youth the thick tomes of earlier African exploration, he perhaps would have been more comfortable accompanying one of the many European explorers who traversed the beckoning land of Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet even in his own time, Brom emerged along with Armand Denis and Lewis Cotlow as one of the most prolific postwar chroniclers of the 'Africa of old' as the continent veered fitfully toward independence.<sup>1</sup> A resourceful man of remarkable wit and tenacity, Brom produced a steady stream of documentary films, books, and television specials on the unique cultural attributes of tribal Africa which were translated into numerous languages and went into wide circulation around the globe.

Brom had begun his film career under trying circumstances during the interwar period. In 1937 he purchased a struggling Czech film production company, renaming it Brom-Film, which released an impressive 10 films between 1935 and 1945. Brom's burgeoning career as producer and director, however, was soon put in jeopardy with the outbreak of war. As the conflict

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1 Armand Denis spanned the World War Two era. In the 1930s, he had teamed up with his spouse Leila Roosevelt for a Central African expedition. Although they would later divorce, Denis married again in 1948, and chronicled through books and films his numerous safaris with his new wife Michaela. Armand Denis, *On Safari: The Story of a Man's Life in Search of Adventure* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1963). Lewis Cotlow searched for 'the primitive' throughout the world. For an examination of Cotlow's film *Jungle Headhunters* shot in the Amazon rainforest, see Amy Staples, "'The Last of the Great (Foot-Slogging) Explorers: Lewis Cotlow and the Ethnographic Imaginary in Popular Travel Film.'" in Jeffrey Ruoff, *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 195-216. See also Lewis Cotlow, *Zanzabuku: Dangerous Safari* (NY: Rinehart & Co., 1956).

worsened, the homefront was increasingly destabilized and Brom-Film was unable to sustain its earlier brisk production schedule. Brom, in fact, had already seen dark clouds developing in Germany, for after gaining power in 1933 Hitler had quickly established the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda under the leadership of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. The result was a veritable breakdown of the industry, as many German filmmakers were arrested or fled the country, and international boycotts cut painfully into profit margins. Filmmakers like Brom in neighboring countries would soon suffer similar misfortunes as the Nazis expanded their sphere of influence throughout much of Europe.

During the war, Brom and other filmmakers found themselves targeted by the Nazis. Yet despite this frightening turn of events, he continued to develop and expand his ideas as a producer. Ironically, it was during this period, when most Europeans were absorbed with the ugly realities of total war that Brom's long-standing interest in the Black Continent actually blossomed into preparations for launching a film expedition to Africa. Unfortunately, the sudden nationalization of Brom-Film by the Communists after the war ended in 1945 caused yet more delays as he was forced to flee to Paris. But soon, breathing easier in newer climes and with the conflict now concluded, he reinvented himself as a 'French' film director, beginning with his postwar transition from Ladislav John Brom, to 'John L. Brom.' Between 1949 and 1962, with Paris as his primary base of operations, Brom traveled extensively throughout Africa—with a focus on equatorial regions—producing a steady stream of documentary material detailing the incredible diversity of African life.

### European Expeditions to the Nile, the Niger and Beyond

From dictators to dreamers, European interest in Africa has a long and fascinating pedigree. In fact, no continent has been more defined by century upon century of European exploration and discovery, dating back well into antiquity at least to the time of Herodotus. Although scholars dispute the exact itinerary of his explorations, Herodotus, often referred to as the 'father of history' for meticulously chronicling his extended foreign adventures in his *Historia*,<sup>2</sup> certainly visited Cyrene and Egypt on the North African coast sometime around 450 BC. These journeys were followed up the next century by Alexander the Great's 'liberation' of Egypt from Persian control in 332 BC, where he was subsequently given the title 'Master of the Universe.'<sup>3</sup>

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2 Herodotus, *The Histories: a new translation by Robin Waterfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

3 Nicolas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), 382.

One of the ‘great unknowns’ in African exploration, even in days of old, was the exact source of the Nile River. Although Herodotus had compiled a few theories derived from various sources, verifiable knowledge remained elusive. If Pliny the Elder is to be believed, sometime around the burning of Rome in 64 AD Emperor Nero sponsored a Nile expedition with the intent of determining its origin, although the vessels were eventually stymied by the swampy ‘Sudd’ of the White Nile when the maritime expedition reached the South Sudan.

The Middle Ages ushered in a new era of fascination with Africa. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the myth of Prester John, a Christian many believed to reside in Africa somewhere ‘beyond the land of the Muslims,’ was fully promulgated by Sir John Mandeville who described in surprising detail the fabulous palace of this noble ruler, the jurisdictions under his control, and the material wealth of his empire.<sup>4</sup> Yet Prester John always remained just out of reach, and indeed today there is no firm consensus as to whether the historical ‘Priest John,’ if there ever was one, actually resided in Ethiopia or India. In any event, on the other side of the continent by the 1420s, Prince Henry of Portugal had begun sending out exploratory expeditions along the bulge of Africa in search of the source of the precious goods traveling along ancient trans-Saharan trade routes. It took years for Henry’s dreams to bear fruit, but in the process the Portuguese availed themselves of another precious resource on Africa’s west coast—slaves—a devastating phenomenon that ushered in several hundred years of European slave trading on the continent.<sup>5</sup>

Interest in African exploration was stimulated yet again in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the 1788 formation of the African Association (Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa) in London. This British club set its sights on discovering the origins of West Africa’s mighty Niger River, as well as locating the fabled metropolis of Timbuktu (the ‘City of Gold’) which had received attention for centuries by Arab explorers like the Moroccan Ibn Battuta (who himself mistook the Niger River for the Nile in 1353), but which had never been visited by a European. The African Association had mixed results: while Scottish explorer Mungo Park famously laid claim in 1795 to being the first European to travel the interior of Africa as far as the Niger River and emerge alive to record his exploits,<sup>6</sup> explorer Daniel Houghton was

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- 4 Sir John Mandeville (edited by Iain Macleod Higgins), *The Book of John Mandeville, with Related Texts* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2011), see especially Ch. 32 for how Prester John got his name.
- 5 Peter Russell, *Prince Henry ‘the Navigator’: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 6 Mungo Park (edited by Kate Ferguson Marsters), *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (reprint by Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). For a seminal critique of the

robbed and killed in the Saharan desert in 1791, while Friedrich Hornemann, dressed as a Muslim traveling with a caravan from Cairo in 1800, simply disappeared.

Not to be outdone by the British, Napoleon Bonaparte set his sights on Egypt at the twilight of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sending in a large French invasion force that overthrew the Mamluks at the Battle of the Pyramids in 1798.<sup>7</sup> Although the invasion was a classic military operation, Napoleon pointedly included 160 scholars, savants and artists on the expedition to acquire more knowledge about the long, noble history of the Egyptians, and to lay the cultural groundwork for tying the region more closely to its French colonizers.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly then, by the time famed explorer Richard Burton described his explorations to a rapt audience at the Royal Geographical Society in 1859, lecturing on “The Lake Regions of Central Equatorial Africa, with Notices of the Lunar Mountains and the Sources of the White Nile,” he could boast of a long history of African exploration behind him.<sup>9</sup> And yet Burton was also at the forefront of yet another wave of intense exploration that spanned the second half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in which European powers raced to colonize most of the large land mass to their south that straddled the equator.

## Images of Africa

The early years of film production in Africa overlap in a curious way with the end of the Scramble for Africa. Ponder for a moment the two modes of representation, broadly speaking, that have served as the general fount of popular European knowledge about Africa for two hundred years—the written travel narrative and the visual text. Leading up to the Scramble for Africa, and during the Scramble itself, publishers in Europe and the United States engaged in their own literary scramble to provide for Victorian audiences the latest compelling exploits of inveterate explorers. From Mungo Park’s early *Travels to*

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role of the gaze and travel literature in the colonial encounter, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

7 Juan Cole, *Napoleon’s Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

8 Yves Laissus, *L’Égypte, une aventure savant: Avec Bonaparte, Kléber, Menou 1798-1801* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

9 Richard F. Burton, “The Lake Regions of Central Equatorial Africa, with Notices of the Lunar Mountains and the Sources of the White Nile: Being the Results of an Expedition Undertaken under the Patronage of Her Majesty’s Government and the Royal Geographical Society of London, in the Years 1857-1859,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 29 (1859), 1-454.

*the Interior Districts of Africa* (1795) to Richard Burton's *Two Trips to Gorilla Land* (1876), and the heavily illustrated travel accounts and memoirs by the likes of David Livingstone, Henry Morton Stanley, Savorgnan da Brazza, Emil Holub, Heinrich Barth and others, the popular exploration genre thrilled readers with the daring exploits of Europeans in exotic lands south of the Sahara. But if the core of these texts was the gripping narrative of foreign lands and strange peoples, nevertheless the popular travelogue was invariably enhanced by an array of supplemental visual aids, often in the form of elaborate prints and illustrations highlighting Africa's flora and fauna as well as the most notable markers of cultural and racial difference.

The arrival of the cinema around 1895—an invention claimed almost simultaneously by both Edison in the United States and the Lumière Brothers in France—created new opportunities for capturing riveting moving images of Africa. Although some filmmakers certainly experimented with the cinema in Africa before 1909, the popular wildlife expeditions of Theodore Roosevelt and Paul J. Rainey in 1909 and 1912, respectively, jump-started the era of expeditionary filmmaking as footage of their exploits went into wide circulation.<sup>10</sup> Soon, motion picture cameras had become ensconced as a critical component of the African explorer's necessary travel accoutrements. Indeed, *Moving Picture World*, one of the leading trade magazines of the silent film era, touted cinema as a crucial technological breakthrough capable of bringing the many worlds of the faraway and exotic into the purview of 'civilized' audiences back home:

Whenever a scientific or geographical expedition is to be undertaken we would put in a claim for the presence of the moving picture camera in the equipment... The various film manufacturing concerns are always to the fore with the moving picture camera in their enterprises. It now remains for the private individuals, the traveling photographer, explorer, geographer and the like never to undertake his journeys without a moving picture camera, as he is always sure to find a market for his pictures and interest a large section of the public.<sup>11</sup>

Before the turn of the twentieth century, African expeditions generally proceeded by foot, often with large numbers of African porters in tow. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the construction of train tracks in select areas of Africa, the rail was increasingly popular for those on safari, like Roosevelt, to access the interior. After World War One, however, with the mass marketing of the

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10 Henry Neil, *Roosevelt's Thrilling Experience in the Wilds of Africa* (n.p.: A. Hamming, 1910). Dan Brockington, *Fortress Conservation* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).

11 Cited in Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and turn-of-the-century visual culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 236.

automobile, a new critical period of exploration had begun from behind the wheel for a daring few. Thus on his several African expeditions, Brom, calling his various vehicles *Tarzan* and *Flying Saucer*, was able to log in an astonishing number of miles as he worked his way deep into the interior, with cameras in tow. Unlike the railroad, the automobile allowed greater freedom to set one's own schedule, travel off the beaten track, and most importantly, travel alone if necessary.

## The Pitiless Jungle

Because of Brom's significant contribution to colonial filmmaking, his films and photographs have been historically preserved at the National Cinematèque in Paris, and at the Smithsonian's Human Studies Film Archives in Suitland, Maryland. His pre-war films are preserved at the Gold Fund of National Archives in Prague, and are often screened on television. In Germany, Brom was given the title 'Explorer of the Decade' after re-enacting the famous expedition of Henry Morton Stanley who traveled extensively on the Congo River. In his lifetime he achieved global renown through his books including *The Pitiless Jungle*, *African Odyssey*, and bestseller *20,000 Miles through the African Jungle*,<sup>12</sup> and with films like *On the Footsteps of Stanley* and *Dr. Livingstone, I presume*, and the five-part television series *African Odyssey*.

Brom's first African expedition, organized in 1949 after securing the necessary financial backing, was also his largest. Traveling to French Cameroun with a film crew of eight, he soon determined that his desire for flexibility, along with problems locating lodging for such a large party, would require that he restrict the size of his future expeditions. The result was that while some explorer/filmmakers in Africa traveled in surprisingly large caravans—Martin and Osa Johnson, Paul Hoefler, and Armand and Michaela Denis are three prominent examples—Brom would soon begin traveling either with a very small film crew, or even alone. This provided him the necessary intimate contact with Africans to forge long-lasting relationships, a trait which set him apart from many of his contemporaries. It also facilitated technological innovations, for Bell & Howell developed a revolutionary small, mobile motion picture camera especially for Brom to be used on his solo expeditions.

The primary goal of his first expedition was to produce footage for *The Pitiless Jungle*, a film cast in the mold of a fictionalized documentary, or 'un

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12 John L. Brom (translated by Oliver Coburn), *The Pitiless Jungle* (New York: David McKay Co., 1955). John L. Brom, *African Odyssey* (New York: Living Books, Inc., 1958). *African Odyssey* was first published by Editions de la Pensée Moderne under the title *Kon-Tiki Africain*.



*documentaire-romancé.*' This genre, in fact, served as the basic template for advertising French colonization and 'civilizing' efforts since at least the 1928 founding of the Colonial Film Committee (Comité de Propagande Colonial par le Film). But following his return to Europe, Brom focused on publishing a book with the same title that, rather than simply retelling the film's storyline instead recounted the harrowing adventures of the film expedition itself. In his prologue to *The Pitiless Jungle*, Brom described what led him to share the details of his filmmaking exploits to the broader reading public:

When I unpacked my cases on returning to Paris, and took out all the masks, bows, panther skins, and other souvenirs of my year in Africa, I found buried beneath them many crumpled sheets of paper. These were my many notes, written during a halt, on truck seats, in some native hut, or under the shade of an age-old baobab tree. They, too, were redolent of Africa, and I could not resist the temptation of rereading them, sorting them, making a book of them. though I soon saw, alas, how impossible it was to bring everything into a single volume.<sup>13</sup>

Brom, of course, was speaking specifically of his book. But what was true for *The Pitiless Jungle* is even truer for any attempt to sum up the measure of a man's entire life in a single text. Nevertheless, the aim of *Africa's Last Romantic*, a remarkable memoir narrated by Olga Brom Spencer, is precisely to pull together the many threads of Brom's productive career—from his many African expeditions, to his books, films, television series—as a testament to the fascinating life of this filmmaker/explorer and as a general summation of his vision that will prove to be of interest to the African scholar and the layperson alike.

*Africa's Last Romantic*, however, offers the reader more than just a synopsis of Brom's numerous travels and travails in Africa. For in *The Pitiless Jungle*, Brom elected to alter the names of both people and places, and indeed, referred to himself in the third person as 'John Hogarth' throughout the book. While this allowed for "greater frankness," in Brom's words, it can be a potential source of frustration for scholars trying to glean the film crew's actual itinerary in the interior of Equatorial Africa. Fortunately, with the publication of *Africa's Last Romantic*, the royal city 'Hogarth' refers to apocryphally as 'Kilembou' can now be positively identified as Foumban, the seat of the Bamoun (Bamum) people in western Cameroon. Similarly, the royal figure he refers to only as 'the Sultan,' we now know to be Seidou Njimoluh Njoya (Olga Brom Spencer refers to him as 'Sultan Seydou' in this memoir). Njimoluh was the son of the remarkable king Ibrahim Njoya, who ruled Bamoun from approximately 1886 to his expulsion by French colonial authorities in 1931, and was responsible for

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13 John L. Brom, *The Pitiless Jungle*, 3.