

African
Ritualization
Seeds

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The arguments in this chapter constitute part of a broader interrogation of the ways that African Americans throughout the hemisphere (from North America through the Caribbean into Brazil) originally engaged their physical environment, developing ritual beliefs and practices that were part and parcel of the general process of creolization—a process that involved inter-African syncretisms, relations with Amerindians, and relations with Europeans. Maroons—runaway slaves and their descendants—provide a privileged window through which to try to make out these early processes of creolization.¹ In the second part of the chapter I consider processes of post-creolization culture change—that is, examples of the ongoing cultural dynamism that continues to characterize creole societies throughout Afro-America.

The earliest generation of enslaved Africans who escaped to freedom in the inhospitable forests of the Americas had to quickly develop means of survival appropriate to their new environments. Rituals of an enormous variety were created, based largely and loosely on African models, to assist them in coping. Thus, they discovered kinds of gods previously unknown to them who inhabited the trees, boulders, and streams of their new surroundings. And each new kind of god, as well as each individual deity, taught these pioneers how to worship them, how to lay out their gardens safely and successfully, how to hunt in their territory, and much else. From the perspective of Saramaka Maroons (who are the descendants of escaped slaves from the Dutch South American colony of Suriname, still living in their forest domain), their ancestors literally discovered America, revealing all sorts of usually invisible powers that continue to make their world what it is today.²

The early bands of Maroons confronted challenges of remarkable complexity.³ Seeking refuge in a harsh and hostile environment, they were faced with the task of creating a whole new society and culture even as they were being relentlessly pursued by heavily armed colonial troops bent on the destruction of their communities. Let us consider briefly the cultural resources these displaced Africans brought to bear.

First, the members of a Maroon band did not share any particular African culture. Although most of them had spent their formative years somewhere in Africa, they came from a variety of ethnic groups, spread across West and Central Africa. Except

¹ For a discussion of some of the epistemological snares in the study of early creolization, see Richard Price, "The Miracle of Creolization: A Retrospective," *New West Indian Guide* 75 (2001): 35–64.

² Saramakas are one of the six Maroon peoples of Suriname and French Guiana, who today number some 118,000 persons. With Sally Price, I have been studying their lives and history since the mid-1960s; references to relevant bibliography can be found in Sally Price and Richard Price, *Maroon Arts: Cultural Vitality in the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

³ The intellectual genealogy of the following several paragraphs is long, beginning with Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), first presented orally in 1973; see Price and Price, *Maroon Arts*, chap. 8, n. 1.

in very limited realms, they were in no position to try to carry on the cultural traditions of their individual home societies, which differed substantially from one member of the group to the next.⁴ Immense quantities of knowledge, information, and belief were transported to Suriname in the minds of the enslaved Africans, but the human complement of their traditional institutions was not. Members of tribal groups of differing status came, but different status systems did not. Priests and priestesses arrived, but priesthoods and temples were left behind. Princes and princesses crossed the ocean, but courts and monarchies did not. In short, the personnel responsible for the orderly perpetuation of the institutions of specific African societies were not transferred intact to Suriname. Thus, escaped slaves faced the monumental task of creating institutions that would respond to the needs of their new life in a largely unfamiliar forest environment.

Second, the members of each band *did* share at least some familiarity with the recently developed culture of Suriname slaves. This cultural core—which had been developed on plantations by seventeenth-century Africans interacting with one another as well as with Amerindians and Europeans—formed an important base, which Maroons drew on as they elaborated their own way of life.⁵

Finally, although early Maroons did not share any particular African culture, they did share certain general cultural orientations that, from a broad comparative perspective, characterized West and Central African societies as a whole. In spite of the striking variety of sociocultural forms from one African society to the next, certain underlying principles and assumptions were widespread: ideas about the way the world functions phenomenologically (ideas about causality, how particular causes are revealed, the active role of the dead in the lives of the living, and the intimate relationship between social conflict and illness or misfortune); ideas about social relations (what values motivate individuals, how one deals with others in social situations, the complementarity and relative independence of males and females, matters of interpersonal style); ideas about reciprocity and exchange (compensation for social offenses, the use of cloth as currency); and broad aesthetic ideas (an appreciation of call-and-response rhythms and sharp color contrasts, attitudes toward symmetry and syncopation). These common orientations to reality would have focused the attention of individuals from West and Central African societies on similar *kinds* of events, even though the culturally prescribed ways of handling them were quite diverse in terms of their specific form. To cite a specific example, the Yoruba “deify” their twins at birth, enveloping their lives and deaths in complex rituals, whereas the neighboring Igbo summarily destroy twins at birth—but both peoples may be seen to be responding to the same set of underlying principles having to do with the supernatural significance of unusual births. In other words, the sharply divergent practices of deifying twins or killing them may be considered, at a deeper level, variations on a shared cultural theme.⁶

For the ethnically diverse Africans who made up any early Maroon group, such deep-level cultural principles would have represented a crucial resource, providing mutually acceptable frameworks and catalysts in the complex process by which new practices, institutions, and beliefs were developed. The process of culture building by Maroons involved contributions by individual Africans with unique cultural knowledge who nevertheless shared a general openness to new cultural ideas and a firm commitment to forging a way of life together, as well as a familiarity with plantation culture and certain more abstract, often unconscious,

⁴ For demographic figures and demonstration of the heterogeneity of the early Suriname slave population, see Price and Price, *Maroon Arts*, 278–79. Arguments about the extent of heterogeneity among early Africans in other New World colonies have become very much the *ordre du jour*. For recent references, see Price, “The Miracle of Creolization.”

⁵ In general, Amerindian (as well as European) influence has been far greater on technical than on conceptual aspects of Maroon life. See Price and Price, *Maroon Arts*, chap. 8, n. 4, *passim*.

⁶ In a nuanced discussion of *Ogun* in Africa and the New World, Sandra T. Barnes has made an analogous argument, proposing that throughout the continent African ironworkers “are exceptional members of society with particularly high or low status (since their work makes them either feared or revered)” (*Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989], 4, my italics). Once again, what matters most is not the form but the underlying principle. Or, as Lawrence W. Levine has put it more generally, African slaves “though they varied widely in language, institutions, gods and familial patterns . . . shared a fundamental outlook toward the past, present and future and a common means of cultural expression” (*Black Culture and Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1977], 4).

understandings that were part of a generalized African heritage. A hypothetical example involving ritual may help illustrate how this process unfolded.⁷

Imagine that one of the women in an early Maroon band gives birth to twins (or becomes insane or commits suicide or experiences any one of a number of events that would have required *some* kind of highly specialized ritual attention in almost any society in West or Central Africa). It is clear to all that something must be done, but neither the young mother herself nor any of the others from her particular ethnic background possess the special expertise needed. However, another woman, one of whose relatives had been the priestess of a twin cult in another part of Africa, takes charge of the situation and performs the rites as best she can remember them. By dint of this experience, then, this woman becomes *the* local specialist in twin births. Performing the necessary rites if the twins fall sick or die, and caring ritually for their parents, she eventually transmits her ritual knowledge (which represents a fairly radical selection and elaboration of what her relative's cult had been) to others, who carry on and further elaborate the new knowledge as well as the statuses and roles associated with it.

Such processes and events, multiplied a thousandfold, created societies and cultures that were at once new and immensely dynamic. African in overall tone and feeling, they were nonetheless wholly unlike any particular African society. The governing process had been a rapid and pervasive inter-African syncretism, carried out in the new environment of the South American rainforest.

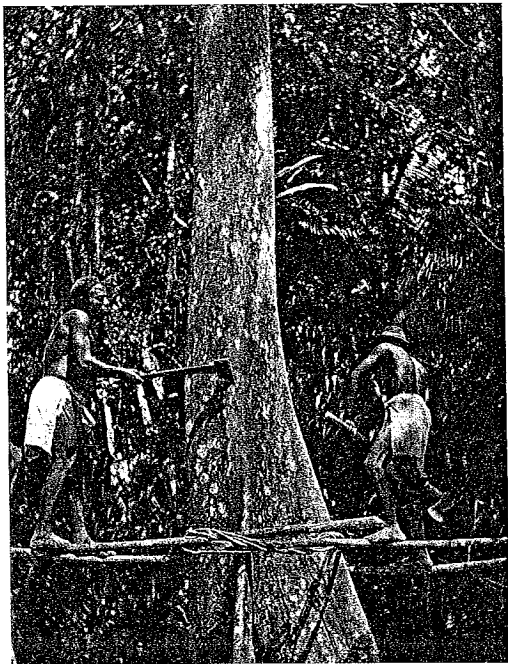
Twentieth-century Maroon historians show their awareness of the role of such processes in the formation of their societies, but they narrate them in more human, less abstract terms, embedding them in their own culture's understandings about interactions between the worlds of humans, nature, and spiritual forces. For modern Saramakas, the key process was one of discovery. They recount, for example, the experiences of their earliest remembered ancestors at the end of the seventeenth century, soon after their successful rebellion and escape from the Suriname plantation of Imanuël Machado (which documentary sources allow us to date to 1690).⁸ These stories invoke individual names and personalities—those of Lanu, Seei, Ayako, and other specific ancestors—in describing how, during the group's stay at Matjau Creek (while fomenting new rebellions among slaves they had known in whitefolks' captivity, and conducting periodic raids on vulnerable plantations), the Matjau-clan people were engaged in building new lives in the unfamiliar forests—forging anew everything from horticultural techniques to religious practices, drawing on their diverse African memories as well as their New World experiences with both transplanted Europeans and local Amerindians. The stories tell how, as these early Maroons prepared their fields for planting, they encountered for the first time local forest spirits and snake spirits and had to learn, by trial and error, to befriend and pacify them and integrate them into their understanding of the spiritual landscape of their new home. They tell how a mother of twins from the Watambii clan inadvertently discovered, through the intervention of a monkey, the complex rituals that would forever thereafter be a necessary accompaniment to the birth of Saramaka twins. And they tell how newly found gods of war joined those remembered from across the waters in protecting and spurring on Saramaka raiders when they attacked plantations to obtain guns, pots, and axes and to liberate their brothers and, particularly, sisters still in bondage.⁹

I would note that the trial and error by which early Maroons learned about local forest and snake spirits involved a tightly interwoven complex of pan-sub-Saharan African ideas and practices regarding illness, divination, and causality. A misfortune (whether an illness or other affliction) automatically signaled the need for divination, which in turn revealed a cause. Often this cause turned out to be a local deity previously unknown to them (since they had not lived in this particular environment before). The idea that local deities could cause illness when they were offended (for example, when a field was cut too close to their abode in a large tree or boulder) was widespread in rural West and Central Africa. But the classification of local deities as well as the identities of individual deities in Africa varied significantly from one society to another.

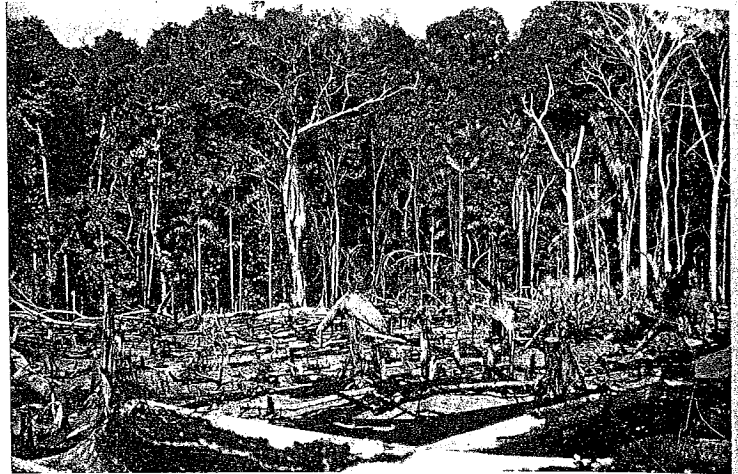
⁷ Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*, 46.

⁸ Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983 [2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002]), 43–52.

⁹ Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 18, *passim*.



1. Tree-felling for a garden site (photo from Willem van de Poll, Suriname: Een fotoreportage van land en volk [The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1959])



2. and 3. *Sanamaka gardens* (Upper Pikilio, 1968)

The early bands of Maroons engaged in communal divination, with people from a diversity of African origins asking questions together (through a spirit medium or other divinatory agent) of a god or ancestor in order to grasp the nature of the kinds of gods that now surrounded them. The detailed pictures that emerged of the personality, family connections, abode, whims, and foibles of each local deity permitted the codification by the nascent community of new religious institutions—

classes of gods such as *vodús* (boa constrictor deities) and their close cousins *watawénús* (anaconda deities) or *apúkús* (forest spirits) each with a complex and distinctive cult, including shrines, drum/dance/song plays, languages, and priests and priestesses. Indeed, such public divination, an arena for the communal creation of new cultural forms, worked as effectively as it did in part because of the widespread African assumption that additivity rather than exclusivity is desirable in most religious contexts.

I cite two specific moments of the process of garden making to illustrate the ways that people discovered (and continue to discover today) hidden aspects of their environment—how the ritualization of the landscape proceeds in concrete terms (Figs. 1, 2, and 3).

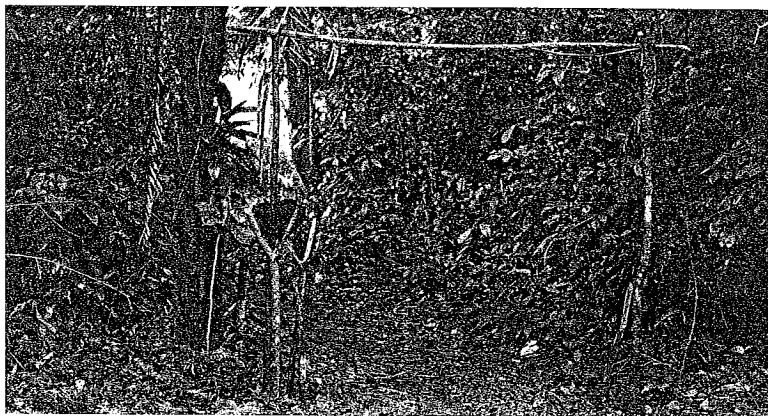
When men go into the forest to choose a garden space for a wife or sister, they consider such physical variables as slope and exposure and soil, but they also look to see whether there are nearby boulders or silk-cotton trees, which may be the abode of forest spirits, or termite hills that are the abode of redoubtable spirits called *akataási*. Once they find a potentially appropriate site, they ask the “god-who-has-the-place” for permission, using any of several divinatory techniques. They might, for example, leave

a calabash with an offering on a forked stick for a week to see if the god accepts it, or suspend a palm frond on poles overnight for the same purpose. Sometimes the domestication of a piece of forest in preparation for making gardens is more complex, as evidenced by a story told by Saramaka Captain Gomé in 1978 about how his own ancestors were able, in the mid-nineteenth century, to gain permission from a particularly fierce local *apúku* to cut gardens in its domain (Fig. 4):

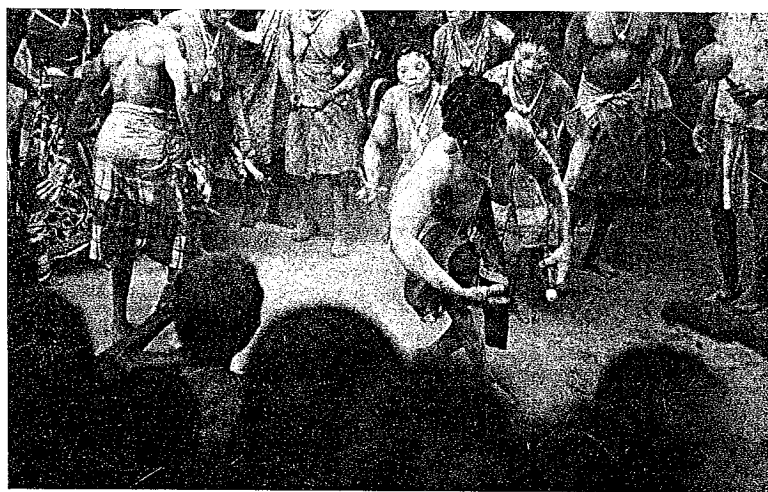
Tata Waimau Amosu, his wife Pelamma, and his brother Uwii came into the creek to cut gardens. But the creek didn't want people to come inside it, the *apúku* who lived there called Masikweke fought with them, surrounded them with a hundred evil things. Well, they made a shed. . . . [Waimau went hunting and returned.] He said, "I went hunting and killed only one bird!" His wife said, "Go to the Afoompisi people. They have Baimbo *óbia* [magic]. Go to them. Beg them for help. So he went. . . . They told him what to prepare. He assembled *nyanyan buka nyanyan* [a combination of various raw foods used in certain sacrifices], cane drink, parrot feathers, cowrie shells, a white-cloth hammock sheet, a white cock. Then they "killed the chicken" [a form of divination] to ask whether the place would accept them now. And they were able to come on over. . . . That *apúku* had been so baad! If you tried to cross the creek in a canoe, it would sink you! So, they did it all [the ceremony]. Killed the chicken. Its testicles were pure white! [indicating that the god was pleased] They raised the flag. They poured the sugar-cane libations at its foot. The *apúku* had said they could work the land there.¹⁰

Often, however, despite the good intentions of Saramakas, a forest spirit is offended—by having a field cut too close to its abode or by being seared when a field is burned too close. Eventually, it possesses a person and becomes an avenging spirit for that person's lineage, for time immemorial. In spirit possession, it announces its name, reveals its kinship relations, and elaborates its likes and its dislikes, and whenever *apúku* rites are held it will come to dance and, often, speak through its new medium.

¹⁰ Price, *Alabi's World*, 345–46.



4. Entrance to a Saramaka garden marked by palm-frond guard and offerings (in calabash) to the forest spirits of the vicinity (Upper Pikilio, 1967; photo: Richard or Sally Price)



5. A snake-god rite among the Ndyuka Maroons of Suriname (Dütabiki, 1962; photo: Wilhelmina van Wetering)

The second moment of discovery in the standard gardening process is the burning of the field, after the brush and trees have been cut and left to dry for some weeks. The day after the raging fire has consumed all but the large, still-smoking trunks, men and women walk gingerly through the ashes looking for the skeletons of boa constrictors that may have been caught in the fire. If found, the remains are placed in a tiny, specially built coffin and buried ceremonially. And before many weeks pass, the spirit of the *vodú* god who lived in the snake will possess someone, usually a woman, in the matrilineage of the woman who owns the garden. The god, once domesticated by a long and complex series of rites, will speak intelligibly, tell its name, disclose details of its family and residence, and reveal its special likes and dislikes. That woman's lineage will thenceforth remain in a special relationship with that god, now an avenging spirit (Fig. 5).

These two examples show how Saramakas interacting with their environment in the process of making gardens discover normally invisible spiritual beings who enter into long-term relations with them and, through spirit possession and other forms of divination, become active agents in the ritual life of the village. Through such gods, Saramakas discovered, and continue to discover, the workings of the spiritual world. And with the advice of these gods, they make, remake, and come to understand, in ever-expanding detail, the specifics of the landscape in which they live.

Whereas twentieth-century Maroons recounting their ancestors' early years in the forest envision a repeated process of discovery—an unfolding series of divine revelations that occurred in the course of solving the practical problems of daily life—anthropologists or historians might describe the process as one in which these particular spirits were being created or invented to fit into a generalized religious model that was familiar to most members of the various African ethnic groups present.

Saramaka accounts of the origin of their twin rituals provide another example of how Maroons envision this discovery process. Here the metaphor is not divination but a different kind of divine intervention. Nevertheless, it represents a precise Maroon way of speaking about the process of legitimizing a newly created institution that took place nearly three centuries earlier. The story, as recounted in 1978 by my late Saramaka friend Peleki, runs as follows:

Ma Zoé was an early Watambii-clan runaway. Once in the forest, she gave birth to twins. One day she went to her garden, leaving the infants in a nearby open shed. But when she returned for them, she saw a large monkey sitting right next to them. So she hid to watch what would happen. She was afraid that if she startled the animal, it might grab the children and carry them into the trees. She was beside herself and didn't know what to do. So she just kept watch. She saw that the monkey had amassed a large pile of selected leaves. It was breaking them into pieces. Then it put them into an earthenware pot and placed it on the fire. When the leaves had boiled a while, it removed them and poured the leaves into a calabash. With this it washed the child. Exactly the way a mother washes a child! Then it shook the water off the child and put it down. Then it did the same with the other child. Finally, it took the calabash of leaf water and gave some to each child to drink. The woman saw all this. Then, when it was finished, the monkey set out on the path. It didn't take the twins with it! And the mother came running to her children. She examined the leaves—which ones it had given them to drink, which had been used for washing. And those are the very leaves that remain with us today for the great Watambii twin *óbia*.¹¹

Today, this Watambii cult services all twins born in Saramaka, involving their parents and siblings in a complex set of rituals that—as anthropologists have shown—draws on ideas and practices from a variety of West and Central African societies (such as the widespread African association of twins with monkeys). From an anthropological perspective, Peleki, who was himself a twin and therefore a frequent witness to the Watambii rites, is describing—through this metaphorical historical fragment relating a Saramaka discovery—a particularly pure example of the process of inter-African syncretism.

Our first outsiders' view of what Saramaka religion looked like dates from the middle of the eighteenth century, thanks to the detailed diaries of the German Moravian missionaries who were sent out to live in Saramaka villages after the 1762 peace

¹¹ Price *First-Time*, 60–61.

treaty with the whites. What we learn is that Saramaka religion was already, in its main lines, very similar to its present form, with frequent spirit possession and other forms of divination, a strong ancestor cult, institutionalized cults for the *apúku* and *vodú* gods encountered in the forest, and a variety of gods of war. But even the great Saramaka war *óbias* (magical powers), including those with names that point to a particular African people or place such as Komantí, were in fact radical blends of several African traditions, forged in processes very similar to that of the Watambú twin cult. They, too, were largely developed in Suriname via processes of communal divination. In early Saramaka, rapid intermarriage among Africans of different origins, with no efforts to preserve African ethnic lines through endogamy, quickly created a highly creolized society—but creolized mainly in the inter-African, not African-European, sense. By the time Saramaka Maroons signed peace treaties with the Dutch crown in 1762 after nearly a century of guerrilla warfare, there were few African-born Saramakas still alive, and their culture already represented an integrated, highly developed African-American synthesis whose main processual motor had been inter-African syncretism, viewed in Saramaka logic as an ongoing process of discovery.

Continuous Ritualization, Ongoing Discovery

The process of ritualization did not stop with the pioneer generations.¹² Gods (speaking in possession or through other means of divination) have continued to instruct Saramakas about landscapes and gardens—their layout, the use and misuse of particular plants, and much else—ever since. Let us consider an example—again involving highly localized spirits of the forest—from the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth.

The Matjau clan preserves the story of how three new forest spirits miraculously appeared to their ancestors on the same day. (Using geographical and genealogical information, I can date the event to about 1790.) This triple apparition explicitly marks the passing of one historical era and the dawning of another: The Matjau-clan *apúku* Wamba, which had been at the center of their battles against the whites, was now replaced by three new (nonbellicose) *apúkus*, who were to take over the tutelary role of the former god for Matjaus. That is, the great Matjau god of war was now replaced by three newly discovered gods of peace.

They were living at Beekuun [on the Lower Pikilio]. One of them [a Matjau-clan person] . . . was at the place upriver called Kwaminangoto. That's where it came into someone's head. Another person was at Hafupasi [the site of present-day Dangogo, the village in which we lived]. Well that person was "possessed" there. On the same day, at the same moment! Well the other person was at Beekuun. And the god possessed him. On the same day at the same time. All by itself. Well, the one that was at Beekuun said, "I'm not the only one there is! One like me 'came' at Kwaminangoto. One like me 'came' at Hafupasi. I'm not the only one who 'came'." Well, the one that came at Kwaminangoto said, "I'm not the only one there is! One like me 'came' at Beekuun. One like me 'came' at Hafupasi. I'm not the only one who 'came'." And the one that came at Hafupasi said, "I'm not the only one there is! One like me 'came' at Kwaminangoto. One like me 'came' at Beekuun. I'm not the only one who 'came'." On the same day at the same time they came.

Then the one at Kwaminangoto said, "Take me to the others of me, at Hafupasi and Beekuun." The one at Hafupasi said, "Take me to the others of me, at Kwaminangoto and Beekuun." The one at Beekuun said, "The two others like me, at Kwaminangoto and Hafupasi, will come to me!" Then they took the one at Kwaminangoto and brought it down. When they arrived just above Dangogo [the village built at Hafupasi], where Doote [the speaker's brother] has his gardens today, the one at Hafupasi said, "The other one of me is nearby; it's already arriving!" Then the gods met and talked. They said, "Let's go to the other one at Beekuun." So they brought the two of them to meet the other one of them. The one at Beekuun said, "The others of me are coming!" And they met there. The gods held a meeting. They said

¹² The establishment of a major new kind of ancestor shrine during the 1840s, by a process of communal divination, is a fine example of how ongoing religious change is produced and sanctioned in much the same way as the initial "discoveries"; see Price, *First-Time*, 5-6.

they hadn't come for any particular reason. It was not that someone had badly cleared gardens [desecrating their forest domain]. Rather, they had been sent by the Sky God to be ready when they were needed. "Like the [other] *apúkus* who fought alongside you people during the wars. Now, our own time has come so here we are. There is no other special reason. But we will show you that all we're saying is true. Wait until the Long Dry Season, and then call us to come into your heads, and we'll come." Well, the Long Dry Season arrived. So our ancestors called them all, to come into their heads. They said, "Well, just as you asked us to, we are calling on you today." And the gods said, "Well, the thing we told you . . . Go clear three garden-sites until all the trees have been felled. Then come back and tell us." Time passed. They cleared the gardens until there were no trees left. The gods said, "No problem. You see those three garden-sites? Burn them. And then come tell us." They burned all three garden-sites. They called the gods who said, "Now, forget about those gardens. Don't go into them." Harvest time came. So they went to look at the gardens. Every crop that people had ever heard of was ripe there! Without anyone having planted them! The gods said they had done it to show that something really real had come down that day!¹³

These three protective *apúkus*, who assisted the Matjau during the final years of the eighteenth century, told the Saramakas that their names were Tjimba, Katamatjimba, and Songianvula.

Less than two decades after their appearance, the most important—Tjimba—was itself replaced, in a similar process of discovery and renewal, by an *apúku* called Saa, who was to play a central role in determining the succession to the office of Saramaka Paramount Chief, upon the death of Chief Alabi in 1820. The man who became Alabi's chosen successor, Gbagidi, was the protagonist in the story of Saa's discovery. Born at the time of the peace treaty, by 1800 Gbagidi was already emerging as an important leader within the large Matjau clan, and he is referred to as an official captain in documents of the period. But it is the coming of the god Saa that present-day Saramakas remember as the real beginning of his glory.

One day while hunting near Kwaminangoto (the site of Tjimba's coming a decade and a half earlier), Gbagidi discovered a mysterious, edenic swamp surrounded by tempting bananas, wild rice, and various other crops. After cutting samples and setting out for home, he was horrified to see his favorite hunting dog being swallowed up by the swamp's quicksand. He called out to the god of that locality, whose identity he did not know, promising that he would give it anything it desired if it would only spare the dog. The animal emerged immediately, unscathed. As Gbagidi, paddling downstream, neared his village, he heard shouts and commotion. His sister Yaya had just been violently possessed by a previously unknown *apúku*. As Gbagidi arrived, the god (speaking through Yaya) announced, "My name is Kokobandamama or Saa," and it recounted in detail how Gbagidi had taken its bananas, rice, and other crops and how he had promised obedience; it then demanded that Gbagidi wash it immediately with an entire demijohn of rum. This done, the god demanded Gbagidi's musket and broke it. In the course of a few minutes, the god had summoned all of Gbagidi's possessions and had destroyed them all. Saa then instructed Gbagidi to build a canoe and go to the city. In Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, Gbagidi was miraculously given a whole boatload of every kind of whitefolks' goods by the city's merchants. With Gbagidi's triumphant arrival back in Saramaka, the extraordinary powers of Yaya's god were confirmed.¹⁴

From an anthropological perspective, the supernatural succession of *apúkus* from Wamba to Tjimba to Saa represents a rich metaphor for ongoing changes in eighteenth-century Saramaka life. A generation after peace was officially established, the time was ripe for Wamba, the god of war, to be replaced by Tjimba, whose attributes were linked to agriculture and the assurance of plenty in a time of population expansion and cultural efflorescence. The death of Wamba's longtime medium, who had been one of the final links to the years of war, prepared the way for a new focus on internal Saramaka growth and development. But Tjimba's replacement by Saa, a scant two decades after its first appearance, also marked a major shift in Saramaka perspectives. For Saa, above all, appears as a god who brings whitefolks' riches. While Wamba's gift was to defeat whites in battle, and Tjimba's to bring

¹³ Peleki, speaking to the author; see Price, *Alabi's World*, 248–49.

¹⁴ For more on Gbagidi and his exploits, see Price, *Alabi's World*, 250–51, 420–22, passim.

miraculous harvests, Saa—though she was a spirit of the forest, like the others, and lived in an edenic garden—was also the harbinger of cargo from the coast. With her help, Matjau men could hope to return from their occasional trading trips with canoes laden with whitefolks' goods.

Expanding Landscapes and Seascapes, New Gods and Rituals

The general emancipation of slaves in Suriname came only in 1863, and although Saramakas had been officially free by treaty since 1762, their early-nineteenth-century trading trips to the coast—commemorated in Gbagidi's adventure—were surrounded by discomfort and the very real danger of being mistaken for slaves. It was only well after general emancipation, in the



6. Saramaka canoemen in French Guiana, late nineteenth/early twentieth century (Sinnamary; photo: courtesy Archives Départementales de la Guyane)

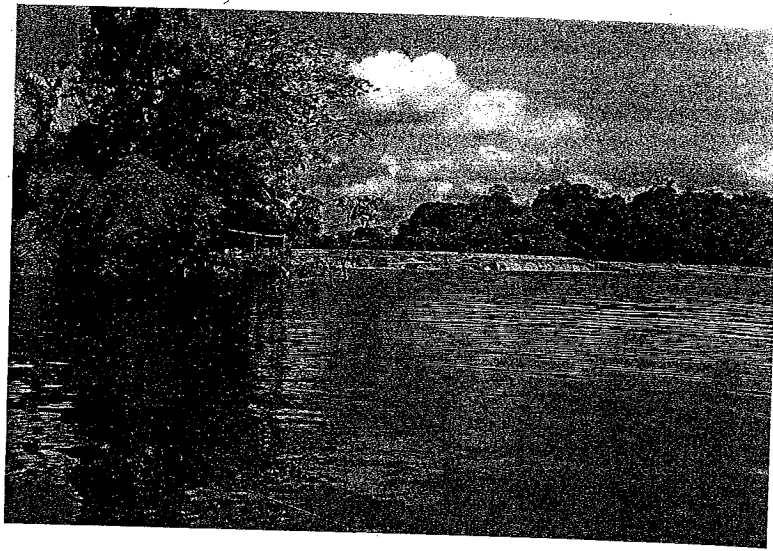
late nineteenth century, that Saramaka men began traveling to the coast in significant numbers and for years at a stretch to work in logging and river transport, earning money to buy goods that they would then bring back to their home villages, where they would stay for several years, before setting off once again. There were two main destinations for these men: coastal Suriname, near the mouth of the Saramacca River, and the far-off border river between the neighboring colony of French Guiana and Brazil, the Oyapok River, which they reached after a several-day journey by river and sea. Around 1900, Saramaka rivermen, who provided transport for the thousands of Creole gold miners working far upstream, established a large village called Tampaki in the tidal plain of the Oyapok. Living in proximity to non-Saramakas, in circumstances radically different from those of their heroic First-Time ancestors, they nonetheless interacted with their new environment in ways that paralleled those of the ancestors. Like them, they discovered previously unknown spiritual powers who, providentially, were fitted to the new tasks at hand and who were closely tied to the new riverine and salt-water landscapes around Tampaki (Fig. 6).¹⁵

Unlike the gods and spirits and magical powers I have discussed thus far, those discovered on the fin-de-siècle Oyapok—*wenti-gádu*, *Dunguláli-óbia*, and *Mama-gádu*—have an intimate and personal relationship with Sally Price and me, and I can write about them from more of an eyewitness perspective.

In 1966, the nonagenarian sister of Paramount Chief Agbago, who was our immediate neighbor in the Saramaka village of Dangogo, announced matter of factly to us that it was a *wenti-gádu* (sea god) who had brought us to Saramaka. Two years later, a four-year-old who often stayed with us while his mother worked in her rice field was attacked on his head by a flock of hornets and, within a minute or two, died of cardiorespiratory shock in Sally's arms; during the subsequent days, we were treated by a powerful Saramaka *gaán-óbia* (great spiritual power) called *Dunguláli*, to ritually "separate" us from the dead child we had been so close to and to prevent him from taking us with him to the land of the dead. And that same year, after several misfortunes had struck the region (drought, an attempted political assassination), I—like the other men of the village—was told to bring my axe to a shrine across the river for a special ceremony conducted by the oracle-deity known as *Mama-gádu*.

Although we had no way of knowing it at the time, these three events, which took place in central Suriname in the 1960s, created strong personal links between us and the Saramakas on the early twentieth-century Oyapok, who discovered there the

¹⁵ For details on Saramaka men's settlement in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French Guiana, see Richard Price, "Liberdade, Fronteiras e Deuses: Saramakas no Oiapoque (c. 1900)," in *Quase-Cidadão: Histórias antropológicas da pós-emancipação no Brasil*, ed. Flávio dos Santos Gomes and Olívia Maria Gomes da Cunha (Rio de Janeiro, 2006), and Richard Price and Sally Price, *Les Marrons* (Châteaufort-le-Rouge: Vents d'ailleurs, 2003).



7. Shrine at Tuliobuka, at the confluence of the Pikilio and Gaanlio, just below the mighty Tapawata falls; in moments of catastrophic drought, it is here that the Saramaka Paramount Chief prays to the Mother of the Waters, Gánsa, the tonê god, 1978

wenti-gádu who “brought us” to Saramaka as well as the *gaán-óbia* known as *Dunguláli*, and who developed there the cult of *Mama-gádu*.¹⁶

Wenti-gádus

I have seen and spoken with *wenti-gádus* a number of times during the past thirty-five years, when I happened to be present at the time they possessed a person, and I have bathed with some of them in the sea near Cayenne and in the Oyapok itself as recently as last year. These particular *wentis* varied from boys who spoke Sranan-tongo, the language of coastal Suriname, with a strong East Indian accent to voluptuous women who sang seductively in Saramaccan and enticed men into the deeps of rivers. Despite considerable personal differences from one individual *wenti* to the next—on the same order as differences among humans—*wentis* (like humans) do have certain things in common.

Pretty much everything that Saramakas know about *wentis* has been learned from people in possession, through whom the gods recount aspects of their normally invisible lives.

Wentis are much like humans, except that they live underwater. Their home territory is the sea, where they have numerous towns and cities (including *Gánlolo*, *Olóni*, *Akinawebí*, *Laibení*, and *Luuza*), but they also travel up rivers and often live for a time at the base of rapids. Sometimes they come ashore and mingle with people unnoticed, which they very much enjoy. Most important, *wentis* bring humans good things—in particular, money, whitefolks’ merchandise, and babies.

The first *wentis* were discovered by Saramakas working on the coast of Suriname in the late nineteenth century: gods such as *Wananzái*, who possessed *Kodji* (who later became the first Saramaka captain on the Oyapok); *Basi Senkeneí*, also known as *Tata Yembuámba*, from the undersea city of *Olóni*, who possessed *Pobôsi* of the village of *Ligolio* and was the first *wenti* to show himself in Saramaka territory; *Tulí*, who possessed *Djamelêti* of the village of *Godo* and ritually prepared hundreds of early-twentieth-century Saramaka men to go to the coast to earn money. I know men who saw *Tulí* in their youth and describe him diving into the river and coming up hours later wearing a beautiful necklace and holding a perfectly dry flower in his hand, and then asking a bystander to take two bottles to the river and to fill them up, and when they tasted their contents back in the village one was filled with rum and the other sugar syrup.

Since early runaway days Saramakas had known about the river spirits they call *tonê*, powerful gods who control the rains and played a key role in the wars against the whites (Figs. 7, 8, and 9).¹⁷ But these gods are strongly local, living in deeps in the Suriname River and its tributaries. *Wenti* gods are different, in that their real home is the sea, although they also swim up rivers and play at the foot of rapids. If *tonês* are largely localized, *wentis* are highly mobile, as befits the tutelary gods of late-nineteenth-century Saramaka canoeemen. Indeed, when Saramakas first came to the tidewater Oyapok, they realized they had arrived in the

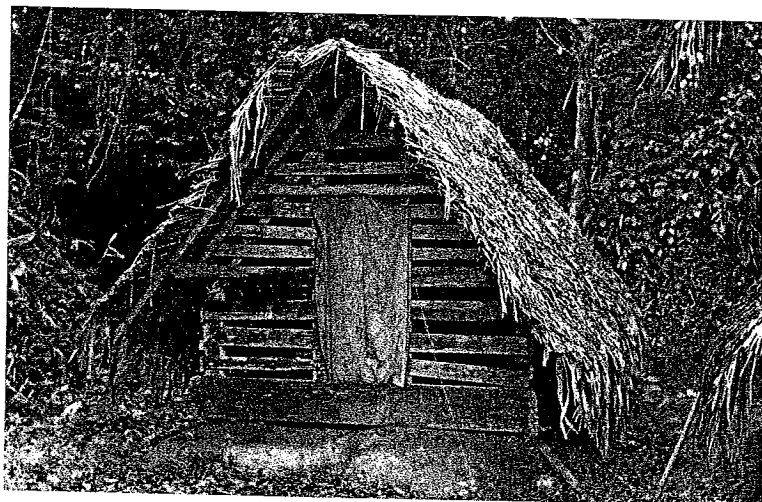
¹⁶ In the standard accounts of Maroon religion there is scarcely a mention of *wenti-gádu* (or, simply, *wenti*), a category of sea gods that in any case do not play a significant role in the religion of Maroons other than Saramakas. Similarly, in the published literature on Maroon religion, there is not to my knowledge, a single mention of *Dunguláli-óbia* or *Mama-gádu*.

¹⁷ For First-Time stories about *tonê* gods, see Price, *First-Time*, 66–68, 124.

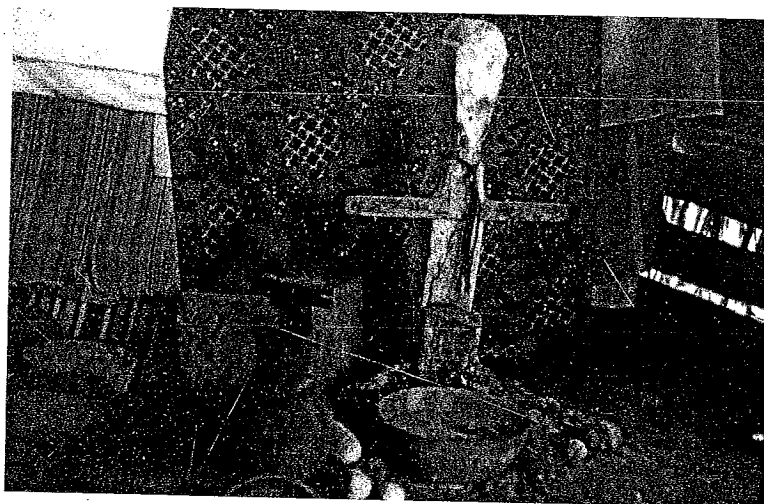
heart of wenti country. Kodji's god Wananzai would dive into the river in the morning and come back in the evening with remarkable tales of this new underwater world, and he brought back other wentis who, in turn, possessed other residents: Kositan got Zaime, Kodjobii got Naosi, Agbago got Todjê, and one wenti named Asantêa even came and possessed Antuani, a Creole woman who was married to a Saramaka. The folks at Tampaki learned from Wananzai and the other wentis he brought back, for example, that at Gaama Lajan (which might be translated as "The Mother of All Money")—an impressive rock formation several kilometers below Tampaki on the French side of the river—under the water was what might best be described as the Central Bank of the World. There, wenti maidens—not at all unlike Wagner's Rhine Maidens (Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde)—stood watch over barrels and barrels of golden coins, which they sometimes rolled out into the sun to dry, singing beautiful songs all the while. They learned that wenti villages are "almost like a school, there are so many children running around," and that if asked appropriately, wentis delight in placing a baby into a(n often infertile) human woman's womb. They also learned that wentis abhor death and blood; they don't like rum or other strong drink, nor sun or heat; nor do they mix with evil. Rather, they love white, bright, shiny, clean things, sugary, bubbly things, and all things cool from the sea (Fig. 10).¹⁸

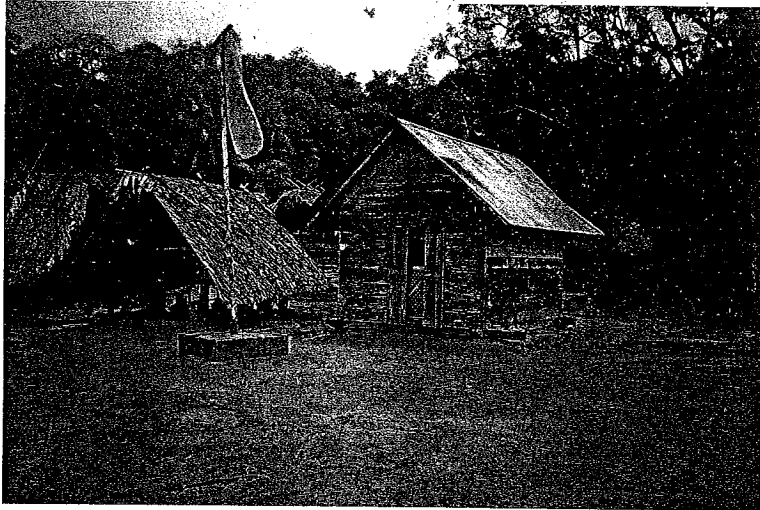
At about the same time that Kodji was discovering a host of new wentis on the Oyapok, two girls from one of the northernmost Saramaka villages drowned when their canoe sank in a rapids. Some time later (some people say seventeen days, others three months, others a year) one of them appeared on a river rock at Mamadan, the great rapids that marked the effective border between "real Saramaka" and the outside world. When she had been ritually "cured" and could once again speak, she told of having been taken to a beautiful underwater wenti

¹⁸ An old man told us recently, with the greatest tone of wonder, of having worked for a time near the mouth of the Saramacca River near where Wananzai had first appeared to Kodji. One day, seeking palm nuts in the forest, he happened to wander into the god's realm and found himself in a veritable Garden of Eden: forest pools overflowing with fish, a stream with rapids where you could sit down on flat, pure white stones that were like tables, beautiful varieties of pineapples and other fruits that no one had ever seen elsewhere, and other miraculous proofs of the powers of wentis.



8. and 9. Tonê shrine at Dangogo, 1968





10. The wenti house in the center of Tampaki, 1982 (photo: Baj Strobel)

palace, where she was waited on by a bevy of young girls. She eventually returned, she said, because she missed salt (which wentis do not eat) and begged them to bring her up to the surface. Older men have told us how, throughout the first half of the twentieth century when on their way to the Oyapok to work, they would stop at the wenti shrine at Mamadan and pour an offering of white kaolin-water, and then, on their way back with their canoes laden with whitefolks' goods, they would pour an offering of sugar syrup (Fig. 11).

Todjê, the wenti who possessed Agbago Aboikoni, the late Paramount Chief, when he was a young man working on the Oyapok, was often credited by Saramakas for instigating the program of gradual rapprochement with the political and economic world outside of tribal territory that took place during the second half of the twentieth century. Todjê provides one of the

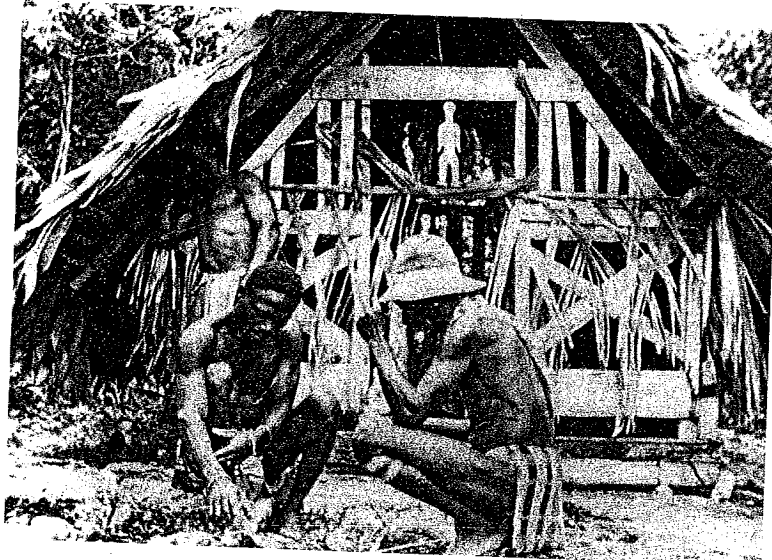
links between the early-twentieth-century Oyapok and Sally and me, for it was this god who is said to have "brought" us—"the first outsiders ever to have slept in the village of Dangogo"¹⁹—into the world of the Saramakas.

This part of the story begins around 1905, when Asimadjo—one the first Saramakas to go to French Guiana—brought his sister's sons Gasiton, Kositan, Gidé, and Agbago from Mana, where they had been working for several years, to the recently founded village of Tampaki. Agbago traveled farther to Belém, in Brazil, where he shipped out for three years on a freighter that plied the Caribbean. Then in his eighties, the Paramount Chief enjoyed telling us about the size of that ship and imitating the sounds of its powerful, chugging engines. Steamships, which Saramakas experienced close-up for the first time during this period, exercised a powerful pull on their imagination and play an important role in wenti lore. In St.-Georges-de-l'Oyapok, I recently spoke with Creole women in their sixties, the daughters of Saramaka men, who remember as children standing with the nighttime crowd at Tampaki watching great wenti ships, ablaze with lights, steam up the far bank of the Oyapok and dock at the mouth of a creek there. They also told me that just below the mouth of this creek, across the river and a bit upstream from Tampaki, was a large wenti village called Tosuósu. According to men I've spoken with, whenever Saramakas riding downstream in a canoe make an offering of beer in the river near that shore, a hand reaches up to accept the bottle—which they say they have seen many times. (I myself saw such an offering being made last year, but I missed seeing the hand.)

Agbago was one of the young Saramakas who was possessed by a wenti, brought by Kodji's Wanzáí, in the early days of Tampaki. Thereafter this god, Todjê, shaped his life in many ways, bringing him into especially close relations with whitefolks, ensuring his success in a broad range of economic and political endeavors, and even bringing him two children with a wife who "could no longer have children." Todjê's full sisters and brothers also possessed Saramakas and played (and continue to play, even today) an important role both in Tampaki and back in Saramaka territory: Basi Senkeneí (mentioned above, who led his "master" Pobôsi to become the official guide for the ill-fated early-twentieth-century Eilerts de Haan geographical expeditions into the interior of Suriname) and three beautiful wenti women, Korantina, Amentina, and Yowentina. (The last is currently married to a god who recently told me, through the mouth of an old blind man in Cayenne, that he is "1,900 years old" and who with this

¹⁹ See Price, *First-Time*, 14–21, 29, *passim*.

same husband had a wenti son called Basi Yontini, who is in the head of one of the wives of the Saramaka captain of Cayenne and with whom the two of us swam at dawn recently on a deserted beach on the edge of the city—the very large, middle-aged woman, once possessed, frolicked in the surf like a young mermaid.) The parents of this sibling set, Dibeónsu of Olóni (“a name to be very careful with—she is the sea”) and her husband Adjéunsu, are also active today: Last year we visited an elaborate shrine to the latter along the Cayenne–St. Laurent-du-Maroni highway, maintained by a great-grandson of Kodji, whose name is forever associated with the wentis of the Oyapok. I could recount the personalities and deeds of many other such wenti families, their intermarriages with other kinds of gods, and the complex roles they play in people’s lives today. For present purposes, however, the bottom line is that wentis—who are forever associated with the landscape and seascape of the early-twentieth-century Oyapok—bring Saramakas happiness, in the form of money, whitefolks’ goods (and relations with whitefolks in general), and children.



11. Wenti shrine at the Mamadan rapids (c. 1955; photo from O. J. R. Jozefzoon, *De Saramaccaanse wereld* [Paramaribo: Varekamp, 1959, p. 28])

Dunguláli-óbia

For Saramakas, the extraordinary powers known as *gaán-óbias*—the magical forces to which they credit their eighteenth-century military victories over whitefolks and their ability to survive in a hostile environment—remain each clan’s most valuable possessions, and most are believed to have been brought by specific ancestors from Africa. In a recent discussion of his people’s “great *óbias*,” the captain of the Saramakas in Cayenne told us in a parable that “there were once three brothers: Bofaángu, the oldest [the *gaán-óbia* owned by the Abaisa clan and said to have been brought from Africa],²⁰ Mandánfo, the middle one [owned by the Awana clan and said to have been brought from Africa],²¹ and Dunguláli, the youngest.” But like so many wentis, who are such an important part of present-day Saramaka life, *Dunguláli*—an important *gaán-óbia*—was in fact “discovered” for the first time on the Oyapok, only at the very beginning of the twentieth century. Kodji once again plays a central role in the story.

Kodji had several gods in his head besides his famous wenti Wanzái, including a ghost-spirit known as a *néngè-kóndè-néngè*, a member of a class of ghost-spirits conceptualized as ritually powerful African men who can possess Saramakas and teach them *óbias* and other ritual lore. Kodji’s ghost-spirit was Akoomi, who worked closely with a *komantí* forest spirit called Afeemaónsu. In an oft-repeated story, a man paddling down the Oyapok would see a small, white-haired old man with a short paddle standing on the bank calling out “Take me across, please! My canoe got loose and drifted downstream.” After the paddler did as asked and continued to Tampaki, he would see Akoomi at the landing place, speaking through Kodji, accosting him and joking with him, “Man, that place you left me on the other side of the river—that was no place to leave me, I almost got killed there!” So the miracle of Akoomi’s omnipotence would again be confirmed.

²⁰ This would seem to be the power for which Ma Kaala served as priestess at the end of the seventeenth century. See Price, *First-Time*, 70–72.

²¹ On Madánfo, see Price, *First-Time*, 112, and Price, *Alabi’s World*, 229–72, which describe the trajectory of this *gaán-óbia* from Africa, through its role during the early-eighteenth-century wars to its central place in the dramatic battle between Christianity and Saramaka religion in the 1780s.

It was Akoomi (perhaps in the guise of Afeemaónsu, who often spoke through him, becoming almost synonymous with him) who taught the secrets of *Dunguláli* to Kodji, but Akoomi himself had learned them from his "father-in-law" in the land of the dead. Here, very much in brief, is how it happened. In the land of the dead a powerful man named Pupú, the owner of *Dunguláli-óbia*, had a beautiful daughter called *Djesu-akóbíta*. One day she crossed paths with Akoomi, who was on one of his frequent visits from the Oyapok to the land of the dead—*nêngè-kòndè-nêngès* are so ritually powerful that they move effortlessly between the worlds of the living and the dead—and she decided to sleep with him—the dead with the living, as Saramakas say. But other dead people intervened and bound him with ropes in preparation for killing him, so she ran off to tell her father. Pupú prepared himself ritually, throwing his sack of leaves and roots over his shoulder, grabbing his calabash rattle, putting his pipe in his mouth and lighting the tobacco, and setting out on the path, very displeased. Eventually, his sack "barked" to warn him he was arriving at where Akoomi was held captive, and he chased off the aggressors, found his son-in-law and, with *Dunguláli-óbia*, untied him, taught him the ins and outs of its rituals, and then sent both *Djesu-akóbíta* and Akoomi off to the land of the living, where they lived in a place a day's journey upstream through the rapids from St.-Georges-de-l'Oyapok called *Dadiaféi*, where Saramakas still proffer offerings whenever they pass on the river. (In the old days, Saramaka canoeemen heading upstream with a load of merchandise for the gold miners would always leave a protective iron or copper biceps-ring on one of the stones in the great savannah at *Dadiaféi* and then, on their way down weeks later, retrieve it all fixed up ritually by the gods and spirits who lived in that sacred place.)

Over a period of years, during the treatment of many cases of illness and misfortune, Kodji learned the leaves, roots, and vines, the taboos, songs, drums, sacrifices, and other esoterica of the *Dunguláli* cult, which has always specialized in separating the living from the dead—helping to free living people from the machinations of the dead. In fact, the young Agbago (the future Paramount Chief) was cured by Kodji's *Dunguláli* at Tampaki after he had accidentally killed his own brother in a tree-felling accident on the Approuague River. Eventually he and another brother, Gasiton, learned the *óbia* and, around 1920, brought it back to the village of *Dangogo* in central Suriname, where Gasiton established the shrine and cult that, in 1968, ritually separated the two of us from the ghost of the boy who had died in Sally's arms.²²

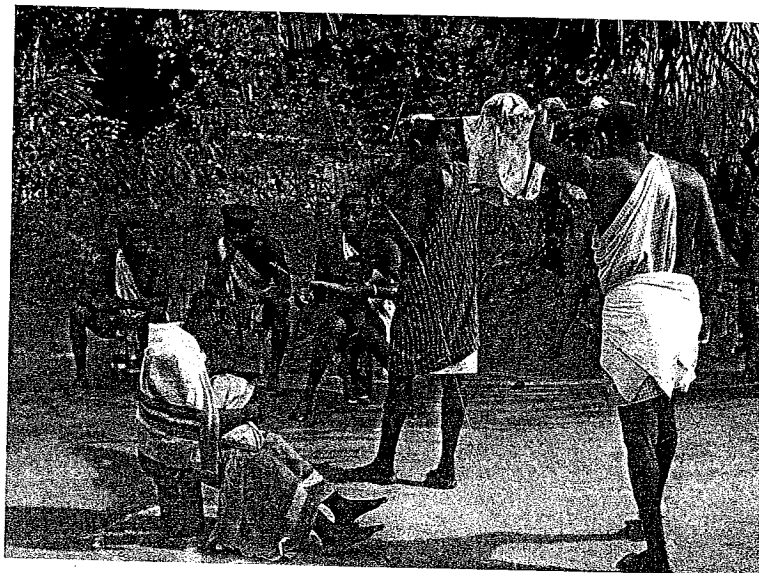
In 2000, back home in Martinique, an important businessman who knew I had connections with Saramakas discreetly asked whether I might recommend a ritual specialist whom he could fly up to "cure" his construction supply business.²³ (He explained that his cash flow was suffering, and he was convinced that some very terrible act had been committed on the site of his business—which sat in the midst of cane fields—during slavery times. He wanted the stain removed.) I arranged for a Saramaka *Dunguláli* master to visit for several days, and together we "smoked" the entire premises (Xerox machines and all) with a mixture of fragrant *Dunguláli* leaves brought from the South American forest, all the while chanting in call-and-response its sacred words: "*Dunguláli-éé!*" "*Pasi-paati!*" "*Dunguláli-éé!*" "*Pasi-paati!*" "*Dunguláli-é!*" "*Awii kandikandi!*" "*Dunguláli-é!*" "*Awii-kandikandi!*" There were also midnight baths in *Dunguláli* leaves, with various things, including a live toad, buried in a hole behind the parking lot, bottles of *Dunguláli* mixtures to be drunk over time, and even predawn ritual baths in the sea—for *Dunguláli* and *wentis* like each other, both being devoted solely to doing good and sharing an affinity for saltwater landscapes. Throughout the several-day ritual, the Saramaka ritual specialist tried to enter into contact with the "god-who-has-the-place," whose identity he did not know, and he seemed incredulous that his Martiniquan client had never before tried to engage this god, who in Saramaka logic about landscapes would be at the root of any possible problem.

²² The priest who presided over our rites was Aseni, Gasiton's brother's son. The "mother" shrine of *Dunguláli* remains at Tampaki. The most important subsidiary is at Haarlem, on the Saramacca River, where Kodji's son brought it before he died, and it was to this latter shrine that Paramount Chief Agbago repaired briefly in 1989, just before leaving the hospital and Paramaribo to go back to his village in the interior to die, at the age of 102. Besides the lesser shrine in *Dangogo*, there has for some years been an important *Dunguláli* shrine in Cayenne, where the priest, who is Kodji's sister's daughter's daughter's son, learned the rites from his cousin, the *Dunguláli* priest in Haarlem.

²³ For obvious reasons, I disguise the nature of the man's business here.

Mama-gádu

Saramakas, like other Maroons, have a special class of gods called *sóói-gádu*—oracle-deities who can be consulted in the form of a sacred bundle affixed to a plank carried on the heads of two men, fore and aft.²⁴ (The god moves its bearers to answer “yes” or “no” to questions posed to it by its priests.) The most important such god for Saramakas resides in the village of Bendiwata on the Gaánlío and is the possession of the Langu clan, who, it is said, brought it from Africa. It was thanks to this god, for example, that the ancestors of the Saramakas were able to settle on the Suriname River, which, until the god’s intervention, had been unsuitable for drinking.²⁵ It turns out that Kodji, the man-of-many-gods who became the first Saramaka captain on the Oyapok, was, before his departure for the coast in the late nineteenth century, a priest of the Bendiwata god. While he lived in the vicinity of Haarlem on the lower Saramacca River, where he first found his wenti, Wananzái, he established



12. *Mama-gádu*, borne on the heads of two men, presiding over the ceremony at which a one-week-old baby, whom the god helped bring into this world, is carried outdoors for the first time (Dangogo, 1968; photo: Sally Price)

in the nearby village of Santigoon a shrine to *Mama-gádu*, a new oracle-deity that might best be seen as a “lite” version of the Bendiwata god—that is, it was used to help sick people get well and to solve other local problems but, unlike the Bendiwata god, did not help fight wars or regulate affairs of state. When Kodji moved to the Oyapok and helped found Tampaki, he brought *Mama-gádu* with him (leaving her Santigoon shrine in the hands of relatives).

In Tampaki, the cult of *Mama-gádu* truly flourished, and she became the central arbiter of village affairs. In front of her house, in a sacred grove in the forest behind the village (which she still shares with *Dunguláli-óbia* today), men would gather several times a week to consult her about everything from what day to begin a canoe voyage upriver to how to deal with a Creole wife’s difficult pregnancy. During the early years of Tampaki, her rites, specializations, and rituals developed apace. One of the ritual specialties she developed was the periodic “cleansing” of men’s axes, called for whenever she determined that things in the world were going awry—too much rain or not enough, epidemics of illness, or other general misfortunes. All men in the village would bring their axes, lay them out in a prescribed manner in front of the god’s shrine, be “bathed” by the god in ritual leaves, and then retrieve their axes the next morning, after the god had fixed them up during the night. In Tampaki on the early twentieth-century Oyapok, the religious triumvirate of *wenti-gádu*s, *Dunguláli-óbia*, and *Mama-gádu* reigned supreme, regulating the lives of Saramaka canoeemen and their families.

I have heard several versions of how *Mama-gádu* traveled from the Oyapok to Dangogo, but the most credible suggests that around 1918, in an accident on the upper river, Kodji sank the large canoe owned by Kositan and that, as compensation, he

²⁴ For a book largely devoted to the history of the most famous of Ndyuka Maroon *sóói-gádu*, Gaan Tata, see H. U. E. Thoden van Velzen and W. van Wetering, *The Great Father and the Danger: Religious Cults, Material Forces and Collective Fantasies in the World of the Surinamese Maroons* (Dordrecht: Foris, 1988). This book has on its cover a photo of this god being carried on the heads of two men.

²⁵ Price, *First-Time*, 98–99.

"gave" (that is, he taught and gave authorization to take home and use) a "picce" of Mama-gádu to Kositan, who brought it back to his home village of Dangogo around 1920 and there established the shrine where my own axe was ritually cleansed in 1968 by the priest, Tioyé, who was Kositan's sister's son. For the past eighty years, Mama-gádu has been the central oracle-deity for the half of Dangogo that lies on the east bank of the Pikilio, and Sally and I often participated in oracle sessions in her realm. Her house lies only a few score meters from the shrine of Dunguláli-óbia, brought back from the Oyapok by Kositan's brother, Gasiton (Fig. 12).

Late-nineteenth-century Saramaka men trying to adjust to the new realities they encountered on the Oyapok frontier needed ways of casting aside older, ill-adapted ideologies and creating newer, better-adapted ones. The fierceness associated with the days of war had become less relevant as the migrant Saramakas now lived amid the free Creoles of French Guiana. Maintaining relations with the gods of war or the gaán-óbias who helped them defeat colonial troops now mattered less (and was less easily accomplished because of these powers' strict taboos against sleeping with women and consorting with non-Saramakas) than developing strategies for living intimately among non-Saramakas and finding ways of earning money and acquiring whitefolks' goods to bring back home to Saramaka after a several-year stay.

Whatever the general faults of a commonsensical, Malinowskian structural-functional explanation of magicoreligious realities, it would seem reasonable to suppose that wenti-gádus, Dunguláli-óbia, and Mama-gádu "made sense" as a focus of Saramaka religion in this new socioeconomic context on the Oyapok. Gentleness rather than fierceness, morality rather than taboos, powers that bring money and merchandise and children, powers that make sick people well and exorcize evil in the form of the dead rather than making warriors invulnerable to bullets—all fit the optimistic moment that the opening up of the Oyapok represented to Saramakas. For Saramakas, this kind of cultural dynamism and creativity (in this case in the realm of religion) is an ongoing, never-ending process, a kind of culture change particularly marked in creole societies across Afro-America.

Throughout Afro-America, landscapes, gardens, and rivers are highly ritualized sites, as trees, bushes, and streams continue to hold enormous powers. "There are no useless plants," said a Saramaka Maroon ritual specialist to Sally recently, "only uninformed people." From the varied and complex ritual "guards" hung in fruit trees throughout the Black Americas to prevent theft to the disposition of protective and curative plants around a Caribbean yard, from the snake gods and forest spirits who share garden spaces with Saramaka men and women to the river and sea gods who share their village landing places (and who form an intimate part of daily life), the relationship of people and landscapes is rich, ongoing, systematic, and ever-developing. It indeed serves as one of the central foci of the process of creolization by which Africans from diverse societies created new communities throughout the Americas and continue to exercise their creative imaginations today.