

Transcribing Gods' Words

Richard Price

Capturing the flavor of the speech of possession gods (tutelary spirits), through transcription and translation, and juxtaposing and contrasting it with that of humans poses special challenges for the ethnographer. Two chapter-fragments from the recently published *Travels with Tooy*¹ exemplify my own attempt to deal with these problems. Some brief introductory materials can provide necessary background for the texts themselves.

Thirty-five years into my research with Saramakas I met Tooy, and it wasn't long before he took me through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole. He has shared with me hidden worlds that, for him, make life worth living and, for me, continue to amaze and fascinate. Clifford Geertz has called anthropologists "merchants of astonishment."² But for me, it's Tooy who plays that role.

Saramakas—today some 55,000 people—are one of six Maroon peoples whose African ancestors were brought to the Dutch colony of Suriname as slaves. Individually, in small groups, and sometimes in great collective rebellions, they escaped plantations into the rainforest where they created a new society and culture, drawing on their diverse African heritages. For nearly one hundred years they fought a war against the colonists and, in 1762, were granted their freedom, a full century before general emancipation in the colony. During the French Guiana goldrush of the 1860s, Saramaka men crossed the border and soon became the mainstays of that colony's river transport, using their extraordinary skills in building canoes and maneuvering them through the fierce rapids, carrying merchandise and men upriver and gold back down. During Suriname's recent civil war (1986-1992), thousands of new Saramaka migrants joined those who had long been in French Guiana, so that today nearly one third of Saramakas live in this little piece of France in South America, the majority illegally (that is, without French residence permits).

Tooy belongs to this long and distinctive tradition of emigration by Saramaka men to French Guiana. For a century and a half, the migrants have clustered together in sites spread across the territory. Though often working for outsiders to earn money, they spend the great bulk of their social lives with other Saramakas. Meanwhile, their *imaginaire*—their thoughts, their dreams, their hopes—is forever grounded in their homeland in the neighboring country of Suriname. In French Guiana, even if they've come there voluntarily, they're always in exile. Their central point of reference is their home village and its spiritual possessions, the stretch of river and forest that surrounds

1 Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008)—a French version will be available from Vents d'ailleurs in 2009. Excerpts are reprinted here courtesy of the University of Chicago Press and come from pp. vii-xi, 41-47, and 271-275.

2 Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, 2000 (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 64.

it, the places they've hunted and gardened in, the world that their heroic ancestors first carved out in the Suriname rainforest more than three hundred years ago.

At first glance, the rough shantytowns that ring the capital city of Cayenne, where Haitian, Brazilian, Guyanese, and Suriname migrants live cheek by jowl, might seem the least likely of places to meet a fellow intellectual. And yet.... The poverty that threatens to crush the spirit of both the hard-working and the unemployed can leave largely untouched the richness of the imagination. Amidst the mud and stench and random violence, Tooy—captain of the Saramakas of Cayenne—runs a household in which spiritual and rhetorical gifts abound. I've felt privileged to play a part in it during the past eight years.

A word on authorship. A colleague in France, hearing that I was writing a book based on work with a Saramaka "best friend," asked whether I would share with him the "signature" (credit for authorship). She pointed out that a colleague of hers had recently published a book "in two voices" with a "homeless" man who was his friend and that their two names appeared as co-authors. A little reflection should make clear that, from the outset, in this case I must take sole responsibility for authorship. Though Tooy's knowledge and imagination and personality animate the book, the act of writing a book, and all it entails, would be as foreign to him as trying to organize and carry out an *obia* ceremony would be for me. Tooy humors me and tries to please me by telling me things I can use in my book—though his real dream, he sometimes tells me, is that I'll move down to Cayenne and join him in his *obia* practice, combining my skills and knowledge with his. We respect each other's expertise, to the extent we find appropriate we share each other's knowledge and passions, and we do our best to make each other's life a bit more worth living. But in the end I'm the American writer and he's the Saramaka *obia*-man.³

A preliminary word about the way I handled transcriptions/translations in the book. The passages within quotation marks (or set off as extracts) are translations of verbatim transcriptions from a recording device that I had at hand during the great bulk of my encounters with Tooy—at first a tape recorder, later a digital sound recorder. From 2003 onward, the latter was rarely out of my hand as I spoke with Tooy, who encouraged me to use this "crutch" for my learning. With few exceptions, all paraphrases of Tooy's speech were also written on the basis of these recordings, rather than simply from memory or notes.⁴

3 For Saramakas and other Maroons, *obia* means "medicine" or "helpful supernatural power." The malevolent associations of "obeah" that exist today in much of the Anglophone Caribbean are absent among Maroons and seem very much part of the colonial legacy (see Kenneth M. Bilby and Jerome S. Handler, "Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life," *Journal of Caribbean History*, 38 [2004]: 153-183.)

4 Referring to the issue of transcription in two earlier books of mine, Trouillot writes that I have

systematically undertaken to record the Saramaka Maroons' voices and narratives from and about the past and present them to an academic audience. Price excels at inventing intellectual quotation marks, new ways of marking on the published page both the boundaries and the dialogs between voices; but he keeps prudently away from epistemological issues.... Yet it may be worth asking which philosophy of knowledge we should use to evaluate native historical or sociological discourse or, for that matter, that of any participant. How do we

*Tooy**In conversation with Tooy*

Readers should be forewarned: Captain Tooy is an inveterate time-traveler—so fasten your seatbelts. Like other Saramaka men, he spends a great deal of time thinking about his distant ancestors, some of whose lives he knows intimately, as well as other normally invisible beings. Neither nostalgia nor intellectual exercise, these voyages help him understand who he is—his forebears' specific powers, wrapped up in their individual histories, give him much of the energy he has to confront the world. Tooy has spent a lifetime putting together his knowledge of them, as he participated in countless rites, political gatherings, and family councils. Over the years that I've known him, he has generously shared fragments of what he knows of them with me, in part in the hope of learning more, from my own stock of stories, built up over years as an ethnographer of the Saramaka past.

Tooy loves crossing boundaries, between centuries and continents, between the worlds of the living and the dead, between the visible and the invisible, between vil-

handle the overlaps and incompatibilities of participants' judgments with Euro-american scholarship?... Anthropology has yet to reach a consensus on both the epistemological status and semiotic relevance of native discourse anywhere. Is native discourse a citation, an indirect quote, or a paraphrase? Whose voice is it, once it enters the discursive field dominated by the logic of academe? Is its value referential, indexical, phatic, or poetic? ("The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21[1992]:19-42, citation on pp. 24-25)

lages on land and under the sea. Whoosh! we're in the 18th century, surrounded by African arrivants who are as familiar as our friends and neighbors. Whoosh! we're talking about migrant Saramakas who built a new world in French Guiana at the end of the 19th century. Whoosh, we're speaking with the sea-gods (whom Saramakas call Wéntis) who control the world's money supply....

*

We're ready then to read two chapters, which appear far apart from one another in the book. The first comes fairly early but well after readers have begun to know about Tooy and his life—including how I met him when he was flown in to our home island of Martinique to cure a local business (a lumberyard) that was suffering from a curse and how Sally Price and I began visiting with him at his home in Cayenne. The second comes near the book's conclusion, after Tooy has already taught me a great deal about Saramaka esoteric languages and cults such as Dúnguláli-óbia (which protects the living from the dead), Komantí (a warrior-healing cult with its own language), Apúku (the cult of forest spritis, with its own language), Papá (the language and songs-drums of funerals), and Wénti (the language of the sea gods). In the second fragment, readers meet a man they already know from earlier parts of the book, Tooy's elder brother Sensiló, who's been blind for several years. Sensiló has a powerful possession god named Flibánti, who joins me and Tooy's own god, Dúnuyángi, in conversation. I hope that the text fragments below, even without the context provided in the book, capture something of the excitement of speaking with these Saramaka men (in standard Saramaccan as well as in the various esoteric languages they frequently employ) and with the gods who periodically possess (and speak through) them, again in a variety of esoteric speech forms.

*

Tooy Possessed

He slips into possession so gently that it's only by the way he addresses Sally (as "Madame," rather than his usual "Sister-in-law") or Kalusé (as "Bási Ronal" instead of "Father") or the distinctive way he laughs or the way he goes on about the man he calls "Stupid-Head" that you realize it's no longer Tooy who's speaking. But he never waits too long to erase all ambiguity by calling out one or another of his praise-names: "I'm Sáki-awángba-djíngmbe, Big Man of the Water! I'm Maníng-awúsu-djíngmbe, Big Man of the Forest! But you can just call me Maníng," he laughs. And then he gets right into his teaching and preaching, boasting and cajoling.

Here's my translation of a recorded transcript, where he's talking to me in 2004, after Sally and I had helped get him out of jail:

Man, the goddess called Dígbeónsu of Olóni, heh heh heh! She bore that whole lot of Wénti women. She's in the water, she's in the air. How could you begin to measure yourself against her? Man, when Death comes to take you, you simply have to go. Your ultimate destiny in life is death. I know you can't live forever and that you don't want to die yet, so I'm going to beg the Great God that he let you live. But there's no one on earth

who won't die, so you'll die one day too, heh heh heh. I'm Awángbadjǐngmbe! I'm Kási-fu-wámbe! Man, come embrace me, come give me a big hug, Brother! I'm Awángbadjǐngmbe, I'm Kási-fu-wámbe! [We embrace.]

The animal called Bush-Hog, it says that its secret name is Gungu-vuláng-mammbá. It's also Sosóo-gídigidji—that's its play name. [He sings:] *Sosóo-gidi-gidjǐ, Ma Yéndjila./ Sosóo-gidigidjǐ, Ma Yéndjila.* And what Bush-Hog tells us is *mbêmbé-na-sabánga*—which means, "the thing we were talking about yesterday is still with us today." That's what the song says. And when those animals stampede through your village, you can't tell me that you don't shake with fear. Any man would wither! That animal has the whole world frightened of it! (I'm so happy you're here again today!) The bush-hog—it's also called Bataa-a-kú (that's what forest spirits call it). And Frenchmen call it "cochon bois." Don't be afraid! I'm the one teaching you this. I'm Awángbadjǐngmbe! I'm Kási-fu-wámbe! Big Man of the Forest, Big Man of the Water! If you try to trick me, you'll just be tricking yourself, my brother! If you ever try to trick me, you'll just be tricking yourself. Mother Dígbeónsu, she's in the air, she's in the water, heh heh heh.

Because of the wonderful deed you did for me, I'm going to give you something special today. The others won't like that but I'm going to do it, because of what you did for me. Had you done it for Flibánti [Tooy's brother's god] he'd have given you the very same gift. I'm telling you straight! When you go home, find yourself a bit of nutmeg, in the shell. Get four sticks of cinnamon. (Brother, I'm giving you some heavy witchcraft! Serious stuff! Make sure you don't tell Stupid-Head about this. Stupid-Head mustn't hear that I'm telling you this. This is something that only you and I should share. And you'll have to pay me twelve coins for it!, heh heh heh.) That nutmeg, it's Akoomí's nutmeg! [the spirit who brought Dúnguláli-Óbia] This is a really big thing for me, Asáki-awángbadjǐngmbe. I'm also Kási-fu-wámbe. And Akumbulá-dênde. I'm Pakatá-fuadjú. I'm Kuláng-káma-bulá-dembu. Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh!

Well, you take those things and you pound them in a mortar, púm púm púm, mash them up. Find four biscuits, two male and two female. Put them in and mash them, púm púm púm. (I'm really giving it to you now! So do it! It's your work! You can't go back now.) OK. There's one more ingredient but I don't know if you can find it anywhere near here. When the wind blows, there's a certain tree that cries out [high-pitched] *kwéén-kwéén, kwéén-kwéén, kwéén-kwéén!* [to Sally] Haven't you heard that, Madame?.... [She says "Yes."] You know it! [He laughs with pleasure.] Well, you pound the bark, you take two pieces of the bark, put them together and pound them in the mortar. Then take some *konsáka* leaves, man. And you put them in a large clay pot with the rest. Get three bottles of beer. (If you don't have any, just ask Stupid-Head for them. The man who lives here, he's Stupid-Head. He makes out that he knows things, but what does he really know? If he doesn't watch out I'll cut him to pieces! I've already cut him up twice. Brother, haven't I cut him up twice? He pre-

tends he's "ripe"—what kinda ripe? But I won't cut him up again, not yet, anyway. Brother, you needn't be afraid of me.) Now, go down to the sea, wait for the third wave that rolls in, catch a bit of it in a calabash and bring it home. Open three bottles of beer, man! Put it all in the pot. Then wash in it, Brother. And watch how things go for you after that! (But don't tell Stupid-Head—or anyone else. This is between you and me.) Ma Yowentína and her father Adjéunsu and her grandmother Dígbeónsu fu Olóni, heh heh heh. The big man who's master of the sea—do you know his name? (The man, not the woman!) [I say "Adjéunsu."] That's right! So, you call his name. You stand before your doorway. You open one more bottle of beer and you pour a libation to him right in front of the clay pot. Then you wash yourself with what's in that pot until you're clean all over. The woman can wash too—you needn't be afraid. Other men will desire her but the man who takes her will drop stone dead! Don't worry. It's me! I'm telling this woman, whether she sleeps with a man on Stupid-Head's watch or she doesn't, he couldn't help you out either way. But from now on you're dealing with me! The man who tries to seduce her will collapse in his tracks! Time for me to leave, now... [He sings a strange song, *Wayo, wayo, tjala, tjala....*] I'm still here, man! I want to thank you for what you've done. Only the Great God himself can really thank you in a fitting way. But I walk with Olóni. The things I've given you today, take them, hold them tight! *Wayo, Wayo, tjala, tjala....*

And the god sighs very deeply, and leaves. Tooy looks up, wearily, and asks Ma Yaai (one of his two wives) to bring him some tobacco.

From the time I met him, on our first visit to Cayenne after Roland's lumberyard cure, Tooy's god, Dúnuyángi, has displayed special courtesies to me, explaining that he'd been to our home in Martinique and had been treated with respect. Do we happen to know, he now asks slyly, what he'd seen out in front of our verandah? I say I have no idea, so he elaborates. "If you seek me you shall find me," he sings. "If you seek me you shall find me."

I'm Master Djidjíngmbe, I'm Sáki-awángba-djíngmbe as well. Now, you and Stupid-Head, you're like two brothers—but don't forget, I ain't no relative of yours! If you enter the forest and curse it, it's me you're cursing! If you go in the water and curse it, it's me you're cursing! Because I'm Sáké-awángba-djíngmbe and I'm Maní-awónsu-djíngmbe too! So, I'm going to tell you some lies, and you'd best listen up!

In front of your house, near the edge of the sea, where the water doesn't even think about trying to be cool anymore, there's an old man out there. His eyes are here, right in the middle of his head! [He points to the top of his skull.] That's not his home, just a place he likes to rest. You know that little cove behind the mountain? That's another place where the old fellow likes to relax. In fact, those are his two preferred places.

Now, when this guy looks up at you, it's from the two eyes on the

top of his head. It happened like this: He had a daughter named Zoofayaúnde who was one beautiful girl. People were coming from all the underwater villages for a fête at his place. The man is in a house over here, his wife is over there. The "play" really heats up. And then the visitors notice Zoofayaúnde. "Oh, that woman there, we want her! We want to take her away with us!" There were two brothers who came to the fête. One said, "Brother, I'm going to start drumming. You go dance with the woman." He grabbed the drum and began playing, [he sings] "I'm drumming my heart out, I'm drumming my heart out in *ayaónde* [repeat]". The place was really on fire! One of the boys jumped on the father, grabbed his face with his fingers, and put out his eyes. Meantime, the other made off with the daughter. (I was there but I wasn't the one who took her.)

A long time later, she showed up at her parents' village and sang out [he sings] "I've come to see how you're doing, I've come to visit. I'm Zoofayaónde, and my mother's Ahómedjí. (Now, her father is Konkí-fu-Azô, the King of Azô. Her mother is Ahómedjí. The village is Azô.)

The old man, you can see him coming up for air just off the point to the south of your house. But he has two gardens—one, where you see the fireflies at night on the hillside, and another on a hill called Zeeagbagóbúka. You should pour offerings of beer—not rum—to him, calling him by name: Konkí-fu-Azô. He owns that part of the sea. He's the king there. His eyes are in the middle of his head. He's looking up at you from down below the sea with his eyes on top. Because the boy jumped on his head and struck out his eyes so the other one could make off with the daughter, Zoofayaúnde. (Man, was she a looker!) By his powers, the king grew back his eyes, but they came up on top of his head.

And he concludes, "Come embrace me, man, come embrace me woman. We've talked a long time...."

Before he leaves, I ask the god what *ayaónde* means. "It's underwater language!" he chuckles. "*Ayaúnde* is the name of the gong, the great gong under the sea. They have one in the meeting house of each of the towns down there, Gaánlolo, Olóni.... When it rings, the whole world of Wéntis hears it." And then he confides, "If I hear it ringing—even though I'm not a 'water person' myself, I can dive in and go to the meeting, too." Another time he tells me *ayaónde*, or *ayaúnde*, is the way Wéntis speak of a great rocking motion—sometimes it refers to the tides and sometimes to the ringing of the great underwater bell, back and forth. Perhaps, I suppose, they're one and the same (Dúnuyángi's hermeneutics of depth...).

"Give me some tobacco," Tooy's god orders me another time, suddenly adding, "There are words in this world that you've never once heard! Heh heh heh." And then he regales me with a few of them.

The creature called Papágádu, have you ever heard of it? [I allow as I've had some experience with these snake-gods.] OK. But I'll bet you don't know how it says its praise-name. It says, "I'm Adjí-kódo-gidi-únzu-

moyon. If the wind blows, I coil up, if the wind doesn't blow, I coil up." But this isn't just any Papágádu! It's the one that lives underneath the earth—The Great Papágádu, The Earth Mother, The Big-One-of-the Forest, it's all black without any stripes! And it's got an agouti's head! [sort of like a rabbit] It doesn't have a snake's head! If you travel till you come upon it, you've seen the face of Evil. You'll die. Here's how he says his name: "I'm Adjí-kódo-gidi-únzu-moyon. If the wind blows, I coil up, if the wind doesn't blow, I coil up."... Brother! When I shoot the breeze with you, you must remember it all, and when you repeat it, don't be afraid! Don't be afraid, man. I know what I'm telling you. This is exactly what that Papágádu says: *Adjí-kódo-gidi-únzu-moyon*.

Brother, the forest—that's what they call *zumê*. The secret name for "forest" is *zumê*! (Man, I just love to talk with you because we understand each other, not like when I talk with those young folks who don't understand a thing.) Man, the secret name for "forest" is *zumê*! If you're in the forest, don't ever say that word! If you say it, you'll never come out! (Now, it's really *kwamá*-reeds that have that secret name. *Kwamá*'s secret name is *zumê*. They use it in Papá songs, they play it on the *apínti* [talking drum], but they use it as the secret name for the whole forest as well.) That's why both Papágádu and Howler Monkey have the same praise-name. They say they're "Zúmê-koko-kudjumê, the child of the forest, the mother of the forest." (I don't care what you do with Stupid-Head but when you and I are talking, don't forget a word I tell you, Brother!)



Tooy Possessed

That great snake who lives at the base of hills. He's the one who gives Wéntis clothes when they come ashore to walk among humans. Just the way the police give you a visa to walk in a country when you cross the border. That snake lets the Wéntis come onto shore. One of these snakes was called Asodátan, that's the name already! People from the Matjáú clan killed him. I worked four years with a Matjáú man and learned all about it. That god, Asodátan, has the agouti head. He gave me three words to say but I don't use them anymore. They're too dangerous. Howler Monkey says his name is Zumê-koko. He has the same name as that thing. They both say their praise-names the same way. It means that he's the child of the forest, the mother of the forest. Asodátan says his name is Gwesíalíngi, or Zumê-koko-fu-zúme. The great money *óbia* of the Matjáú clan, this is its god! I made that *óbia* seven times with my Matjáú-clan friend. He didn't hide any of it from me. This is the *óbia* that Chief Agbagó used to get his money!

Yet another time, in the midst of some other story, he adds more about bush-hogs, sharing some esoteric hunting lore that he still hasn't told me the end of.

The woman called Gwágasa-Gwandímbo, [loud, high] heheheh! heheheh! heheheh! [To Sally:] Madame, the woman called Gwágasa-Gwandímbo [loud, high] heheheh! heheheh! heheheh! [He almost loses control, beginning to sob but catches himself.] Oolo! [To me:] Man, I'd better snort some tobacco.... The woman called Gwágadja-Gwandímbo has a daughter who is guardian of the savanna called Tjéntji-mbéi-na-tjéntji. She watches over all the bush-hogs and her name is Ma Gumbá. You need to know exactly how to call on her to get her to let them out of that savanna. If you don't do it right, Brother, watch out!

Sometimes, he teaches us moral lessons.

Man, you go to a large "play." You're there for quite a while, watching the action. Then a young man has cramps and feels diarrhea coming on. He has no idea where people go to shit in that village. So he walks out the main path, as fast as he can without attracting attention, pulls off his loin-cloth, and squats next to the path. He shits right there, but before he can straighten up, pieces of shit stick on one side of his cheek. The path says to him, accusingly "You've come to the 'play' to ruin my reputation?" He answers, "No, I didn't come with that intent. But I couldn't help myself. I just had to go." "You just had to go?" asks the path, sarcastically. "Well then: *Ma zuunzjé dê kwayán, kwayán sa kó záádome.*" That's what Main Path says to Living Person. The guy gets back to the crowd and people begin asking, "What smells exactly like shit around here?" The crowd parts until the guy is standing all alone right in the middle, with the shit reeking on his body. That's what this means: *Zuunzjé de kwáyan, kwayán sa kó záádome.* You come to ruin my name and you've got shit sticking to your own body!

This, the god tells me when I ask, is “*kôndè* [‘country’ or ‘old-time’] talk,” not a particular esoteric language.

On another occasion, after he’d been with us for an hour, the god said:

Man, let me snort some tobacco.... Time for me to go, heh heh heh. Woman, [sings to Sally:] “If you deceive me, I’ll deceive you too. I’m one smart guy. If you love me, I’ll love you too. You’re one shapely gal!” [Addressing Sally:] Madame? If you forget me, it’s no one’s fault but your own. But I’m not the kind of guy someone ought to forget, or else! When you see me, be sure to greet me, ‘cause I’m Sáki-awángba-djíngmbe, I’m Kási-fuwamba, I’m Agúngula-bitjêmbé-who-pays-for work, I’m Gulán-kámagulán-beyimbó. Eh, heh heh heh heh heh! Woman, I knew my father, I knew my mother, I knew my grandparents. [He sings, almost as if in pain:] “If you deceive me, you’re only cheating yourself. If you deceive me, I’ll deceive you too.”

The god then calls out to Céline, Tooy’s Guadeloupean wife, who has driven over right from work downtown.

Woman, you just walk by without even greeting me? Heh heh heh. Woman, how is Yowénza doing? Céline, I’m talking to you! (That’s what I’ve heard Stupid-Head call her: “Céline.”) How’s Yowénza? [Céline comes up and hugs him from behind, saying in the few words of Saramaccan she knows, “I don’t understand.”] You don’t know who Yowénza is? You and he sleep in the same hammock every night and you don’t even know his name? Well, why do you sleep with him then? [I translate for her and she giggles.] I’m talking about Stupid-Head! [He laughs.] Let’s split, Brother. Let’s rest.

And suddenly the god is gone.

*

Dúnuyáangi Takes Over

When Tooy is feeling drowsy, or bored with my questions, he sometimes tells me he doesn’t really know much about Dúnguláli, Komantí, or Papá, but that when Tatá Dúnuyáangi shows up, he certainly can give me the low-down. And three or four times during our visit in early 2005, he did.

Thanks to Sally, we had just finished a delicious lunch, accompanied by a bottle of wine we’d brought. Tooy stood and led us and Sensiló (who was visiting from Suriname) in a Wénti song that’s appropriate after you’ve eaten well, to thank them and invite them to join you. We stood and all held our glasses (in the event, plastic and enamel cups) on high, waving them as we sang, *Keenidjò-yéi gaán lô gádu, mi keenidjò dá únu-e. Mi adjò, mi adjò. Mi keenidjò, mi keenidjò. Wêmêdjé fu ayónde, mi keenidjò dá únu-e. Mi adjò, mi adjò. Tjónugbé, gonobí olo matoo, hwémato, kínadu gadi mi hwénu kee, mi adjò, mi*

*adjò, tjönugbé-o.*⁵ Tooy, Sensiló, and I retired to the leaf-room, where Tooy opened three beers from the six-pack that a client had left earlier. He was feeling happy. And soon his god, Dúnuyáangi, announced himself, reeling off some of his praise-names:

Me! I say that I'm Abún-dékpopo-yakpánu. I'm Ketjikí-dedomí-mawamá-di-domí-mawá-mi-koonu-dye! I didn't let my father down. Abún-dékpopo-yakpánu. He's the one who begins playing at twelve o'clock midnight and doesn't stop till daylight. He doesn't stop playing for anything. A real Lángu warrior! I'm Adúnuyáangi. I'm Edjénamá-u-Musútu. I'm Dúnuyáangi-fu-adjú. I'm Avungulá-dêbe. I'm Pakaká-fu-adjú. I'm Fulánkáma-vulá-bêmbú. I'm Dêmidé-kalángu, Lazánkan-kalángu, Djididjé-kalángu. [To me:] Man, come embrace me, Brother! [He begins pouring a libation of beer:] Ma Yowentína, take some, Ma Dígbeónsu, take some. Ma Yemánzáa, take some. We're near the seaside. Near Afémaóla. We must live, we must grow old, we must enjoy our old age! You know how to bring us to the lake they call Simbámbe [more usually he calls it "Kibámbe"], let us bathe there and then come back. Let's drink together!

Sensiló teasingly asks me what I saw in the sea in Martinique one day, and Tooy's god encourages me to tell him about the Wénti ship moored below our house that I'd shown him a photo of at the hospital. After I describe it, Sensiló in mock reprimand says I shouldn't have taken that picture. "If there were women on board, do you think they were *your* wives?" he asks. Tooy's god laughs loudly. Sensiló says he's only joking, that I did well. But I shouldn't forget that those Wénti women are his! He adds that the work I do really has its benefits—the ship that came, didn't Tooy get out of jail? Well, who do you think got him out of jail? It was those Wéntis on the ship!

5 When I asked Tooy for an explanation of these esoteric words in Wénti language, he said, "Open the beer, pour it in the glass!" and he sang: *Mi kénidjò, mi gádu mi gádu mi kénidjò dá únu-e, mi adjoo, mi adjoo, tjönúgbe*, adding that *tjönúgbe* means "pour it in the glass" and *kénidjò* [or *kénidjò*] means "beer" (though it sure sounds like it came from "cane juice").



Sensiló

Tooy's god tells me that the man over there—he points toward his brother—is very mischievous. If you're angry with him, you're angry with the earth and the forest. If you're angry with him, you're angry with the sea.... I realize that I'm in the presence of Flibánti as well as Dúnuyángi! So I ask this *óbia*, who knows so much about the way the world works, something I've been wondering for a long time. First excusing myself for my question—to which Dúnuyángi breaks in to say "There's nothing evil about being curious!"—I explain that I come from America but I don't know what country Tatá Dúnuyángi comes from. Sensiló's *óbia* says, "Friend, he hails from Olóni! [the great Wénti country in the middle of the sea] That's where he was born. But he was raised on this earth and likes to hang around here on land. That's how you and he have gotten to be such buddies." He tells me, "Those people from Kínaazáu [another Wénti town], they sometimes have children with forest spirits here on earth." And he reminds me, boasting, "I'm the big man of the forest." He also informs me that "the person who owns the ship that was moored in front of your house is Mamá Dígbeónsu of Olóni! It's her grandchildren who are the crew."

Dúnuyángi interrupts to say, "Set your tape recorder, I want to tell you something. (Excuse me 'taatá'—I call the *óbia* here 'taatá'. He owns the whole part of the earth we live in here!) [Singing] 'If you seek me you will find me [repeat]. I'm Manídjíngmbe. I'm Sakíawángadjímbe as well! [Falsetto] If you seek me you will find me'. I'm the headman of water, I'm the headman of the forest. What could you do in the forest without my knowing about it? It's not by chance that Stupid-Head [Dúnguyángi's name for Tooy] and Skin [Dúnguyángi's name for Sensiló] love one another. When this man [Sensiló] comes to himself [comes out of possession], tell him that I'm Awámbadjíngmbe. I say 'Skin! It's not because you and Stupid-Head have the

same mother. There's a reason. Mother and child, father and child, they must love each other. Let's live like that'. Man, let me tell you something. If Stupid-Head were to forget about Skin, or if Skin were to forget about Stupid-Head, it wouldn't be because they wanted that. It would be because someone put something between them. Let them stay together, however messed-up they are physically. If you try to kill them, you'll die before them. They're in the hands of God. The Sky God is the boss, The Earth God is the boss.... There's a prayer for every occasion...." Tooy's god teases Sensiló's *obia* for a while. Then Tooy's god gets on Sally's case—she's joined us after washing the dishes—saying that she really resembles a certain woman he knows, but he's not going to say her name. Finally, he says that it's the one who lives in the deep in front of our house in Martinique [Zoofayaónde]. "You should throw a bottle of beer out to her from time to time," he reminds me. Sensiló's *obia* asks Sally if she's had children and when she says yes he tells her to take good care of them. He takes her hands: "The place you live by the sea, you know who sent you there?" He laughs. "They own that place, those Wéntis. Live there well, with those children of yours... Take care of your husband.... Set a table there, make a little altar looking out at the sea, where the wind blows. That ship will come back again and dock there." Sensiló's *obia* says his goodbyes. Tooy's god quietly departs as well.

Another afternoon, when Tooy and I are chatting alone, Dúnuyángi suddenly appears. "It's Bási Dúnuyángi talking to you here! That's Yêdjemaná-u-musútu. That's Adúnuyángi-fu-adjú. I'm the singer/drummer for the whole world. Man, I really love to play! I'm Awángbadjéngmbe, I'm Kasi-fu-wámbe! I'm Avúngula-bitjêbi. I'm Pákasa-fu-adjóbi-fu-ánkama fulá bêmbe!" Then he quickly tells me "They say that the man called Stupid-Head loves 'plays', that he loves to sing and drum. I say 'Bullshit!' It's his head that's so stupid! He likes to think he's smart but he's just a stupid-head. On the other hand, you and I have so much to talk about! When we sit down, we'll talk about Kwadjó [vulture Komantí], Apúku, Wátawenú, Mavúngu, and Yáu [river Komantí], before we talk about Djebí [jaguar Komantí]." And he sings me a song in Komantí.⁶

Yáoo, mi yáoo, mié mié mié mié mié mié mié mié mié. Adínka-e, mié mié, busikí mié mié ku adjú mié mié, mi obia mi ka moomi odia poki mi sa fomaní mani o mi da awamba djebí-e, yáoo. Brother, Giant Otter sang that to God. He'd been hunting underwater for twelve days and twelve nights without finding a single thing to eat. Finally he came to the surface and sang this to God. (What he said was dangerous—"if God wants him to kill, he'll eat, if God doesn't want him to kill, he'll still manage to find something to eat." You really should never say, "if God wants, you'll do something, and if God doesn't want, you'll still do it"—it's only if God wants that you'll do it. But that's what he said.) You should say these words only when you're really in need. As soon as Otter sang them, he dove under and caught a large *kumálu* [a tasty fish].

Dúnuyángi grabs Tooy's tape recorder and starts playing a tape of a Komantí "play" at his house. I notice that most songs are in normal Saramaccan, with a few Komantí

6 Examples of Tooy—and Dúnuyángi—singing in Komantí and other esoteric Saramaka languages may be heard at <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/price>.

words inserted. Dúnuyángi keeps telling me the circumstances in which to sing each song—you must prepare the clay pot of medicine leaves before you sing the one he's playing now, for example. Sometimes, he picks out pieces of a song to explain to me: the name of the ship that carried them from Africa was Dokofóankáma, the name of the captain of the ship was Abáan!

He turns off the tape and begins a story. "An old man and his wife, Abaníba—both blind—stayed home while everyone else in the village went out to hunt *kwimáta* [a heavily-scaled swamp fish that can be caught when there are heavy rains and that Komantí calls *akántabúba*]. She had one fish but couldn't take off its scales because she couldn't see. So she cried, singing, *Ándo kó a kó pèè asánti vīlīvīli, djáifosó gwágwá kó pèè asánti vīlīvīli, Bási adínka gwagwá kó pèè asánti vīlīvīli, ma bandimba-e kiyóo un án yéi-o akántabúba, asánti baáa, u án yéi, lúku akántabúba*. And suddenly she could see! She cut the fish and cooked it. Komantí, Brother!" Which reminds him of another Komantí song, this one about Three-fingered Sloth, whom Komantí calls *adínka*. The god sings, *Adínka, a ta yénde-o, woyo yénde-e, adínka hên ta yénde-e, bási adínka-e, medi a kái*. "The three-fingered sloth is small and ugly—but don't imagine you can bring it down from the tree with a single shot! It says, 'When you shoot me, twelve men will hear before I'm dead'. He says his praise-name is 'Bási Adínka fu Umbádjini'. Or 'Dóble'. When he climbs up the *mombé* tree to seek food, he's so sweet to watch, Good-looking guy!" And he sings again, *Adínka, a ta yénde-o, woyo yénde-e, adínka hên ta yénde-e, bási adínka-e, medi a kái*.

"You know what Three-fingered Sloth says? 'If you mess with me, I'll mess with you! If you shoot at me, I'll get you!' In Komantí he sings, *Kwan, kwan, bó yéi, mi o pèpè yu, kwan, kwan*. And then the hunter says to him [singing] *Kukube i míti mamima, a kukubele míti mamima*." Dúnuyángi is getting excited and says "Let's quit talking—there's too much to say!" and he begins dribbling some beer on the ground. "Bási Djesí, Bási Akoomí, Bási Yembuámba, Bási Sáká-Amáfu, Avó Adjó, Bási Ofilíbaní Mafuyewá, take this fine-looking liquid, let's drink." Then he sprays some to either side with his mouth and offers me the bottle.

"Let me teach you how to pray to the Gádu-a-Kamía, the 'god-of-the-place' that lives in each particular spot. You call it Kasiámba Naná Gwambísa, Kasiámba Naná Gadeénza. There's no place that doesn't have one! You say, 'My *djódjo*, my *saámba*, give me strength, Avó Kasiámba Naná Gwambísa, Avó Kasiámba Naná Gadeénza'." And he explains, "*saámba* is the soul [normal Saramaccan *akáa*], *djódjo* is the body of your name-sake. Avó Kasiámba Gadeénza is the god on the west side, Naná Gwambísa is the one to the east. This is 'country' talk—not any other particular language." I try to confirm my understanding that there's an Earth Mother (a Mother-of-the-Earth) and then there are multiple "gods-of-the-place." Tooy's god says "Yes, The Earth Mother is the boss and has various 'gods-of-the-place' who work for her. You should call her Malulú Matjáangi." I ask which of these we prayed to at Roland's lumberyard in Martinique, the first time we met. "It wasn't the god-who-has-the place—it was the Earth Mother. What we said was, *Malulú Matjáangi asákpáa asákpáa tjá kinikini kapèèkapèè kutjábíabía dumiyáyá madesídagbó*. It's saying that the person who's trying to kill you there [Roland's enemy, in that case], has his thigh [Saramaccan *asákpáa*] above his knee [Saramaccan *kiní*!—that is, he's someone real—and that Malulú Matjáangi should do the necessary to get him away from there. This is 'country talk'."

"Komantí men sing," Dúnuyángi continues, "*Tée mi yéi Afánti boóko mi o fiá! Tée mi yéi so mi sa fiá-e. Afántinèngè mi o fiá. Tée mi yéi so mi sa fiá-o!*" [In normal Saramaccan,

"When I hear Afánti is defeated I'll deny it, when I hear that I'll deny it, Afánti people I'll argue, when I hear it I'll argue."] "The country they call Afánti" he tells me, "no gun-battle could defeat the Afánti people! If you're bullshitting me, you could tell me that Afanti's been defeated. If I'm bullshitting you, I could tell you that Afánti could be defeated. But if we're not bullshitting each other, there's no way Afánti could be defeated!"