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From *Fesiten* to *Fesibuku*: Shifting priorities in the Saamaka vernacular

Richard Price and Sally Price

How does vernacular culture shift when people living beyond the reach of Western literacy move out of their traditional villages and into more cosmopolitan settings? Focusing on the Saamaka Maroons of Suriname, we address this question by exploring changes we have been following since the mid-1960s. Specifically, we trace a shift from a distinctive, largely secret historical discourse passed on from generation to generation for most of Saamakas' three-century history to new forms of vernacular communication. As Saamakas have been moving increasingly out of their rainforest villages and into the multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan setting of coastal Suriname and Guyane (French Guiana), the careful preservation of specific historical knowledge has gradually diminished, and forms of discourse better suited to life in more cosmopolitan settings have been creatively adopted. In addition, we follow Saamakas' fascination with the idea (and power) of literacy from their earliest history to their participation in settings where their children are in school and much of their social interactions are thumbed into the keyboards of their ubiquitous cellphones.

Creolization in Saamaka

In the middle of the seventeenth century, Suriname formed part of a vast forested area that stretched from the Atlantic to the Andes, the home of countless indigenous peoples who lived by hunting, fishing, and gardening. The first European settlers were Englishmen from Barbados who arrived with their African slaves in 1651, but in 1667 they ceded the colony to the Dutch in return

for Manhattan, and it soon became one of the most profitable slave plantation societies in the Americas. By the end of the century, some 8,000 African slaves were laboring for 800 Europeans. Most of the indigenous population had simply retreated into the hinterlands.

The ancestors of today's Saamaka Maroons hailed from a large number of West and Central African societies, situated primarily in the Bight of Benin, in West-Central Africa, and, to a lesser extent, in the Gold Coast.¹ These people spoke a large variety of languages and came from scores of different states and polities, many of them at war with one another. Once landed in Suriname, each shipload of captives was further dispersed by the planters, who chose their purchases with the intent of separating people who might have known each other or spoken the same language. Combined with a firm policy of keeping slave families together when plantations were sold, the slaves' primary identity rapidly shifted from their African origins to their plantation community, where they now had family and comrades, and where they had already begun to bury their dead.

Within the earliest decades of the African presence in Suriname, the enslaved Africans had developed the core of a new social identity, a new religion, and much else. The new creole language for many of them was Sranantongo, but on the largely Jewish-owned Suriname River plantations, whence the ancestors of the Saamakas fled, it was the closely related Dyutongo, lexically influenced by Portuguese. These languages became the vehicles of everyday communication. The striking "non-Europeanness" of this early cultural synthesis, when compared to developments in other parts of the Americas, can be explained in part by the unusually high ratio of Africans to Europeans in the colony—more than 25:1 for much of the eighteenth century, with figures ranging up to 65:1 in the plantation districts. On Suriname plantations, it was in large part the recently arrived Africans (rather than Europeans) who effected the process of creolization, building a new culture and society. There, creolization was built on a diversity of African heritages, with far smaller inputs from European and Amerindian sources. By the time the ancestors of the Saamakas escaped into the forest during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, they carried with them the seeds of a new cultural system as well as a new language.

The great bulk of the people who became known as Saamakas escaped from Suriname's plantations between 1690 and 1712. With rare exceptions, they had

¹ See, for the numbers from each region, R. Price 2008: 291–3.

been born in Africa and had spent little time in slavery, more often months than years. Most were men still in their teens or twenties. By the time of their escapes, however, most of them spoke Dyutongo, which they then quickly developed into their own distinctive creole language, Saamakatongo. As they faced the challenge of building political, social, and religious institutions while waging war and trying to survive in an unfamiliar environment, they drew on the immense riches of their African pasts, though their relative youth meant that much of the esoteric and specialized knowledge of their homelands was not available to them. Leadership drew authority not only from personal charisma and knowledge but also from various forms of divination, which encouraged the communal negotiation of developing institutions. The runaways, fighting for their individual and collective survival, had strong incentives for rapid nation-building.

By the end of the seventeenth century, significant numbers of enslaved Africans had escaped into the surrounding rainforest. The colonists fought back, sending countless militias in pursuit, and handing out gruesome punishments for those they recaptured—hamstringing, amputation of limbs, and a variety of deaths by torture. But by the late 1740s, the colonists were finding the expense overwhelming and recognizing that the expeditions themselves (which included enslaved men as guides) were contributing to further marronage by making known to the enslaved both the escape routes from the plantations and the locations of Saamaka villages.

The colonists saw that the increasingly costly warfare was not achieving its goal and decided, during the late 1740s, to sue their former slaves for permanent peace. After several great battles between Saamakas and colonial armies during the 1750s, a peace was at last negotiated. On September 19, 1762, several hundred Saamaka men met with representatives of the Dutch colonial government, and a peace treaty was sealed.²

Our first outsiders' view of Saamaka life (including language) dates from the middle of the eighteenth century, thanks to the detailed diaries of the German Moravian (Herrnhuter) missionaries who were sent out to live in Saamaka villages right after the 1762 peace treaty and to the excellent Saamakatongo–German dictionary compiled by one of the missionaries (Schumann 1914). What we learn is that by this time, Saamakas had created a society and culture

² The Okanisi Maroons had signed a similar treaty with the Dutch in 1760, and the Matawai concluded their own in 1767.

that was at once new and dynamic. African in overall tone and feeling, it was nonetheless 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.

Indeed, Saamaka culture, including language and religion, was already in its main lines very similar to its twentieth-century form, and included frequent spirit possession and other forms of divination, a strong ancestor cult, institutionalized cults for the Apuku and Vodun gods encountered in the forest, and a variety of gods of war. But even the great Saamaka war *obias* (magical powers), including those with names that point to a particular African people or place such as Komanti, were in fact radical blends of several African traditions, largely developed in Suriname via processes of communal divination. By the time Saamakas had signed their peace treaty with the Dutch crown, there were few African-born Saamakas still alive and Saamaka culture already represented an integrated, highly developed African-American synthesis whose main processual motor had been inter-African syncretism.

Take language, for example. The lexicon of standard (everyday) Saamakatongo is derived roughly 35 percent from English, 25 percent from Portuguese, 5 percent from Amerindian, Dutch, or French, and 35 percent from one or another African language. If, however, we include esoteric (largely ritual) languages, we find that the African contribution is closer to 50 percent.

Saamakas have a number of esoteric languages, known only to those (almost all men) who learn and practice the particular spiritual cults associated with them. They include Apuku (forest-spirit language), Dungulali (an *obia* language), Komanti (the major *obia* language, associated with warrior-gods), Luango (associated with the Langu clan), Papa (used only during funeral rites), Pumbu (associated with the Langu clan), Papagadu (snake [boa constrictor]-spirit language, sometimes called Vodun), Tone (river-god language), Watawenu (anaconda-spirit language), Wenti (sea-god language), as well as others. Saamakas, like other Maroons, also have a well-developed drum language, known as Apintii, which is used in various rituals and for political events.³ Much of the lexicons of these esoteric languages draw on a variety of African languages but they also use words from other Maroon languages as part of their practices of disguise and play. For example, the speech of Saamaka Komanti mediums is heavily infused

³ Hundreds of examples from the lexicons of these languages as well as hundreds of songs, proverbs, and drum rhythms performed in them are available (R. Price 2008: 309–89).

with borrowings from the Okanisi Maroons of eastern Suriname, and Okanisi Kumanti mediums incorporate words from Saamakatongo in their speech.⁴

First-Time in the Saamaka vernacular

Our first two years of anthropological fieldwork with the Saamaka people were predicated on our obeying two taboos, spelled out publicly by gods and oracles when we first arrived in 1966 and often reiterated by village officials after that: Sally would have to go to the menstrual hut upon the first sign of blood each month and obey rules designed to contain the ritual dangers of her contaminated state; Rich would have to avoid ever discussing anything about *fesiten* ("First-Time," seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history). Nor were we to walk on the path that led by the shrine to the Old-Time People (those who shed their blood for freedom), or travel upriver to the creek where the Saamakas' ancestors had lived during the wars of liberation. Anthropology was allowed, history strictly forbidden.

But Saamakas and their gods had not fully considered the extent to which their coveted early history, the stories of their formative years fighting the whites, animated their everyday lives. The near daily prayers at the local ancestor shrine, at which we were welcome as part of our participation in village life, called upon a myriad of First-Time people, whose feats and foibles were evoked; references to First-Time permeated the proverbs and sacred songs that we recorded; sicknesses and other afflictions were mitigated by rituals intended to placate the offended First-Time people who were causing them. Indeed, because early history was never far from the surface of day-to-day interactions, it was simply not something that we could ignore. By the time we left at the end of 1968, Rich knew that someday he would be returning to work more directly on the secret history that he already understood lay at the heart of Saamaka identity.

A decade later, after several shorter-term stints of fieldwork in Saamaka, we spent a year at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, a pleasant bicycle ride away from the Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague, where Rich worked very much as a traditional historian, copying out court proceedings, materials written by colonial administrators or soldiers who had led expeditions against

⁴ Until the early twentieth century, the Okanisi people were referred to in the literature as Ndyuka (or Djuka).

the Saamakas, and other eighteenth-century documents. By our return to Saamaka in 1978, he was in possession of what was to become a precious gift for the men who held the secrets of Saamaka history—important new materials about their own early past, always exchanged with the greatest discretion.⁵ Fortunately, the growth of his historical knowledge that work in the archives had produced coincided with a realization by some Saamaka elders that their sons and nephews were losing interest in preserving historical details and that if knowledge of First-Time (at least the nonritual parts of it) was not written down it could be lost forever. In 1978, at a meeting in the paramount chief's council house, they made a formal request to Rich to be their chronicler. This official approval, which contrasted so strikingly with the explicit prohibitions of the 1960s, encouraged him to forge ahead and begin working with the (mostly elderly) men who had painstakingly built up stores of First-Time knowledge, serving as the guardians of Saamaka history. He recognized that although they were unschooled in Western terms—that is, they could neither read nor write—they were historians in the fullest sense of the term.⁶

In the 1970s and 1980s, many traditional Western historians vehemently denied that oral history that recounted events of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries could be considered anything other than “myth” or “legend.” Human memory, they argued, was simply too fallible, too susceptible to dilution and distortion over the course of repeated tellings. But Rich, along with historians of Africa and Oceania working during the same period, was able to demonstrate that Western historians had grossly underestimated the capacity of humans in non-literate societies around the world to transmit knowledge over the centuries and to help open up oral history to the same degree of historiographical attention that had traditionally been given to the written word.⁷

For the Saamakas in the 1960s–1980s, First-Time—the era of the Old-Time People—differed most sharply from the recent past in its overwhelming inherent power.⁸ Stretching roughly up to 1800, First-Time was not more “mythologized”

⁵ For detailed discussion of these exchanges with Saamaka elders, see R. Price 1983: 14–30.

⁶ Calling these men “historians” (rather than “informants”) was at the time quite radical, as was publishing their photos with accompanying brief biographies (R. Price 1983: 32–7).

⁷ Two of the best examples from that period are Cohen 1977 and Denning 1980. In addition to *First-Time* and *Travels with Tooy*, Rich's contributions include *Alabi's World* (1990) and *The Convict and the Colonel* (1998).

⁸ The following paragraphs reprise observations that appeared in *First-Time*, where many detailed examples are offered. The use of the present tense—the ethnographic present in this case—stretches from the period of our initial fieldwork until the Suriname civil war that began in 1986, after which much changed.

or less accurately recalled than the more recent past, but knowledge of it was singularly circumscribed, restricted, and guarded. It formed the fountainhead of collective identity; it contained the true root of what it meant to be Saamaka. The imminent danger of First-Time resides, in part, in its specialized uses in social action. The recent past (roughly the last hundred and fifty years) that intrudes on everyday life tends to affect only individuals, domestic groups, and occasionally, whole village units. In contrast, First-Time relates to larger and older collectivities, most often the “clans” that trace their ancestry matrilineally back to an original group of rebel slaves. It most often comes alive in the restricted but highly charged arena of interclan politics. It was the migratory movements of the First-Time people that established land rights for posterity; it is the details of how they held political office that provide the model on which modern succession is based; and it is the particular alliances and rivalries among the wartime clans that shape the quality of their descendants’ interactions today. Any dispute between clans—whether over land, political office, or ritual possessions—immediately brings knowledge of First-Time to the fore. In these settings, when corporate property and prestige are at stake, such knowledge becomes highly perspectival; the point of knowing about a First-Time event is to be able to use it in support of one’s clan.

First-Time also provides the “charter” for the most powerful ritual possessions of each clan, many of which date back to that formative period. It is to these powers, and the First-Time ancestors associated with them, that knowledgeable Saamakas appeal in times of real crisis. Learning the details of their history provides an unmatched degree of personal security, for one need thereafter never be alone: the Old-Time People and their enormous powers will be standing by one’s side. Such specialized knowledge of the past, then, means power in a very direct sense; it permits some measure of control over the vagaries of the unpredictable present.

Saamaka collective identity is predicated on a single opposition: freedom versus slavery. The central role of First-Time in Saamaka life is ideological; preservation of its knowledge is their way of saying “Never again.” As Rich overheard one man reminding another, “If we forget the deeds of our ancestors, how can we hope to avoid being returned to Whitefolks’ slavery?”⁹ Or, in the memorable words of Peleiki—a middle-aged Matyau clan man then being groomed as a possible successor to Paramount Chief Agbago Aboikoni—“This

⁹ *Ee u lasi fa dee gaansembe du a fesi, dee bakaa o toona buta u a katibo?*

Figure 5.1 1707 painting by Dirk Valkenburg of a “play” on the Suriname River plantations of Palmeneribo-Surimombo, from which the ancestors of the Saamaka Dombi clan escaped soon thereafter. Such drum/dance/ritual performances were a central part of vernacular expression for enslaved Africans on Suriname plantations. (Photo: Danish Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Copenhagen.)

is the one thing Maroons really believe. It’s stronger than anything else ... This is the greatest fear of all Maroons: that those times [slavery and the struggle for freedom] shall come again.”¹⁰

¹⁰ *Hen da di soni businenge abi moo taanga! ... De taki, ‘Di ten de o toona ko baka.’* Saamaka proverbs and folktales are filled with morals about not trusting other people, and self-defensive posturing and manipulation permeate interpersonal relations—see, for examples, Price and Price 1991.

It may be useful to outline the ways that Saamaka men of knowledge become historians. (We continue to write in the present tense but are thinking of the period that lasted until the mid-1980s.) The pursuit of First-Time knowledge is a strictly solitary endeavor, and in any clan the number of older men considered to really “know things” can be counted on a single hand. (Women and youths, with few exceptions, are prohibited from entering into the world of First-Time knowledge.) Within any clan, each expert’s knowledge is idiosyncratic, learned from a unique network of older kinsmen and reflecting that individual’s particular strengths as a historian. Over the course of his adult lifetime, each interested man must construct his own convictions and support for his claims about “what really happened” two and three centuries earlier, based on bits and pieces of relevant songs and rites, disputes, and celebrations that he makes it his business to attend to, as well as on the supplementary narratives he is able to wheedle out of his often-reluctant older kinsmen. The Saamaka historian-in-training hoes a very long row; those that take it on as a vocation, like the finest Western historians, seem positively driven by an inner need to make sense of the past, quite apart from the prestige that may incidentally accrue from their special mastery. Question-asking about First-Time was traditionally prohibited. As Peleiki explained, “[a]sking about things in detail simply did not occur. The old folks would tell you things. You just sat there without a sound, listening. And that was all.” Several of the most knowledgeable Saamaka historians explicitly credit their accumulation of special knowledge to their own natural curiosity and “shameless” insistence in pressing their elders. Such learning requires tact, strategy, and patience, the skills of a master elicitor.

The research procedures of the apprentice Saamaka historian (like those of his Western counterpart) include a good deal of plain sitting (often after having traveled a considerable distance for the privilege). “First-Time things,” Peleiki once mused, “don’t have only one head ... Your ears must truly grow tired of the thing before you will really know it.” Likewise, Asipei, a Watambii clan elder in his late sixties, stressed the need for patience when he used to go to be instructed by his mother’s brother: “You can’t get up from your stool quickly if you really want to hear things!” Certainly, the necessity to sit passively for long periods is one reason why the pursuit of First-Time knowledge is not for everyone. Cock’s crow, with an older man speaking softly to a younger kinsman: this is the classic Saamaka setting for the formal transmission of First-Time knowledge. (Cock’s crow is the hour or two that precedes dawn, when most villagers are still asleep in their hammocks.) Although the bulk of any man’s First-Time knowledge is in fact pieced together from more informal settings—from overheard proverbs

and epithets, from songs and discussions of land tenure—discreetly prearranged cock's crow discussions are, conceptually, the epitome of First-Time learning. It is at such times that a captain is supposed to instruct a potential successor, a grandfather his grandson, or a mother's brother his sister's son. Indeed, the standard phrase with which a Saamaka denies knowledge of First-Time is: "I never sat down with the oldfolks at cock's crow."

The nuggets of historical knowledge transmitted at cock's crow are deliberately incomplete, masked by a style that is at once elliptical and obscure. It is a paradoxical but accepted fact that any Saamaka narrative (including those told at cock's crow with the ostensible intent of communicating knowledge) will leave out most of what the teller knows about the incident in question. A person's knowledge is supposed to grow only in very small increments, and in any aspect of life people are deliberately told only a little bit more than the speaker thinks they already know.

Clearly, the elders that a man knows, and the reputation of these teachers, have much to do with establishing the worth of his own historical knowledge. Even when a person is denigrating his own knowledge in comparison to another's, he uses this idiom. Rich once overheard the 91-year-old paramount chief say, "Tebini ... he saw the very oldest generation. He knew them all! Unlike me, who lived with my father's people [the Fandaaki], whose knowledge really doesn't go back very far." Constant allusions to authority, a repeated shoring up of one's bona fides, pervade every discussion of First-Time. One of the most salient features of cock's crow discourse is its recurrent, pervasive historiographical "digressions." Indeed, well over half of cock's crow speech consists of what a Western historian would consider "footnote material"—detailed discussion of sources and prior authorities. Our calling them "interruptions," "digressions," or "footnote material" is not intended to diminish their import; in this nonliterate society, they are a central datum for the Saamaka listener, a crucial part of his critical apparatus. They are the single leitmotif running through all cock's crow instruction.

In any Saamaka narration, the citation of specific sources complements these more general appeals to authority: "My 'great grandfather,' Kositan, heard this from his own father, Adoboiti, who was a [member of the clan called] Abaisa"; or "[the late] Captain Maaku used to tell us boys this." Such specific citations often include copious details about the travel arrangements to set up the meeting, who was sitting where, what they were wearing, and so on—all lending a sense of veracity and immediacy to the account. And Saamaka historians "criticize"

such sources in much the same way as their Western counterparts: [Tebini, skeptically, to Rich:] “Where did he say he heard that story?” [Rich supplies the information.] “That’s a no-good place! [an unreliable source] Of course it isn’t true!” Similarly, Rich has witnessed accusations of “false footnoting”—of the citation of spurious sources—by one man criticizing (behind his back) the words of another. As in our own system, a person’s scholarly integrity in this regard can be his most valuable possession, and any such accusation is taken very seriously.

During our stays in Saamaka, from the 1960s into the 1980s, “First-Time” knowledge remained the core of Saamaka morality. For Saamakas, it held the essential lessons of the universe.

Toward a new, cosmopolitan vernacular

While the transmission of First-Time knowledge has always taken place through a vernacular of sparse, heavily guarded nuggets of historical details, virtually limited to senior men, the vernacular of daily verbal interactions runs along very different lines, practiced by every member of the community, bursting with virtuosity, and constituting one of the signal pleasures of social life.

Indeed, one of the central pleasures of such interactions is creative play with words. For example, a person talking about a watch may call it a “back-of-the-wrist motor” and a Haitian may be referred to as a “Back-of-seven,” since the Saamaka pronunciation of *Haiti* sounds like the Saamaka word for “eight” (*aiti*). There is no set lexicon of such terms; they’re something that individuals have fun coming up with spontaneously in the course of conversations. The names given to items of material culture imported from coastal stores, such as cloth patterns or enamel dishes or styles of machetes, are similarly treated as fodder for linguistic play, drawing on the objects’ physical attributes, the history of their arrival in the villages, their association with local scandals, or other considerations that enhance the pleasure of talking about them.

During the second half of the twentieth century, women sewed men’s shoulder capes in colorful patchwork, using pieces of the cloth that their husbands brought back from coastal stores, and assigning names to each cloth pattern based on anything from local scandals, current events, or visual properties. For example: *Kankan fatu* (“blackbird fat,” for a cloth as vividly orange as the fat of a blackbird), *Ameika go a gadu* (“Americans go to heaven,” just after the 1969 moon landing), *Agbago singi a mote* (“Agbago sank with a motor,” referring to Chief Agbago’s

Figure 5.2 Patchwork shoulder cape (*aseisente*) that belonged to Captain Kala of Dangogo, sewn mid-twentieth century. (R. and S. Price Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; photo S. Price.)

first ride from Paramaribo in a motorboat, which sank in a rapids), *Silaliko opo lagima* (“Suralco raised up the poor man,” commemorating increased job opportunities with the Suriname Aluminum Company in the 1960s, during the construction of the hydroelectric project), *Silo a bedi* (“Sloth in the bed,” a name made up by a woman after her husband replaced her cowife’s hammock with a bed imported from the coast), or *Mangumuyee booko Daume* (“Mangumuyee ruined Daume,” after a woman in the village of Daume was accused of neglecting menstrual prohibitions).¹¹

The kind of joy that Maroons take in playing with such names is well documented for societies throughout the Black Atlantic. Take this example from Ghana, reported at the moment when flared trousers were in fashion:

¹¹ For a list of forty-four cloth names, see Price and Price 1980: 82–3.

“Perhaps you feel shy” (*Gyama wo fere*) refers to a type of Afro trousers with [only] moderately flared bases ... “Gun and bullet” (*Tunabo*) is a teasing title for a pair of trousers without a flared base. The trouser leg represents the gun and the leg, the bullet. “Po,” the sound made by a gun shot, is the same as “*Tunabo*.” “Po” was introduced after people were beaten up for shouting “*Tunabo*.” At times the “critics” don’t say anything, but rather run past and fall down in front of the person indicating that he has shot the “critic” dead with the “*tunabo*.”

(Warren and Andrews 1977: 14–15)

And playful naming of items of material culture can be found in countless other societies around the world; see, for example, the discussion of the role of humor in assigning names such as “ant droppings” or “drunken pattern” to the designs on cloth among the Iban of Southeast Asia (Gavin 2003: 170).

The motifs that Saamaka men include in their famous art of woodcarving (Saamakatongo *tembe*) are also given names, generally based on their physical form (“gun-mouth” for a circle, “monkey tail” for a small spiral, or “turtle penis” for a small band ending in an arrow-like point).¹² Names like this have fed easily into stereotypes of Maroon artistry, as outsiders, misunderstanding them to be a lexicon of closely guarded meanings, have worked them into an all-too-familiar Western stereotype about the often-secret symbolic essence of artistic production among “primitive” peoples.

Partly because most Maroon woodcarvings are made by men for women, outsiders have long cherished the idea that Maroon art functions as a symbolic language between male woodcarvers and the women for whom their carvings are intended as gifts of affection. Each named motif, the idea goes, carries a specific meaning, and the various motifs on a given carving work together to transmit a discursive message. As a (non-Maroon) forestry worker who compiled a dictionary of Maroon symbols put it,

The motifs can be considered like words ... By assigning the right meanings to these motifs and reading them correctly, just like letters and words, it is possible to bring out the maker’s intent. Exactly the way a comma can change the sense of a sentence, the presence of a particular motif next to another one alters its meaning.

(Muntslag 1979: 31)

This misconception of an esoteric “language” of Maroon art, which extends even to claims of grammatical structure, has been widely perpetrated at least since the

¹² The names of hairdos and cicatrization patterns follow the same principle.

late nineteenth century, producing whole dictionaries of symbols designed for tourists and other outsiders. Saamaka artists have consistently tried their best to debunk these interpretations, explaining that their art is made for aesthetic pleasure and that names, which reflect formal attributes of design elements, are simply descriptives (S. Price 2018).

Until the civil war between Maroons and the government (1986 to 1992), Maroons in Suriname lived largely in their traditional territories in the interior, almost as states-within-a-state. But after the civil war, when the government began an active program of integrating Maroons into the larger society (in part with the aim of emptying out the interior of the country to free it up for mineral and timber extraction by foreign multinationals), large numbers of Maroons moved to the coast, in Suriname or Guyane, becoming part of the urban underclass. Today, many traditional villages are barely inhabited and something over half of all Maroons live outside of traditional territories.

A Dutch colony until it gained independence in 1975, Suriname often boasts of being the most multiethnic country in South America. Today, its ethnic groups, in descending order of size, are Hindustanis (East Indians), Maroons (descendants of self-liberated African slaves), Creoles (non-Maroon, largely urban Afro-Surinamers), Javanese, Brazilians, Chinese, Amerindians, and others.¹³ The national language remains Dutch, which is used in schools, by the government, and on TV and radio. But the first language of each group is distinct and the first language of most Creoles, which is used by everyone for communication across ethnic lines, is an English-based creole called Sranantongo (“Suriname language”). Two of the six Maroon peoples (the Saamaka and Matawai, who live in the central part of the interior) speak a variant of Saamakatongo (a Portuguese-, English-, and African-based creole) while the other four (the Okanisi, Pamaka, and Aluku, who live in the eastern part of the country, as well as the tiny group of Kwinti) speak varieties of Okanisi/Ndyuka (an English-based creole related to Sranantongo). Chinese, Brazilians, and Amerindians speak their own languages among themselves.¹⁴

In neighboring Guyane, which is politically a distant outpost of Europe, the ethnic mix is equally diverse. Although French law does not permit ethnic

¹³ According to the latest (2012) census (modified by our own investigations—see R. Price 2018), the total population of 542,000 is composed of 27% Hindustanis, 26% Maroons, 14% Creoles, and 13% Javanese, with the remaining 20% divided among Brazilians, Chinese, Amerindians, and miscellaneous others (including Dutch). In addition, there are something like 400,000 people of Surinamese descent living abroad, mostly in the Netherlands.

¹⁴ For further information on the linguistic situation in Suriname, see Carlin and Arends 1992.

enumeration in the census, estimates suggest that the population of about 280,000 people includes 36 percent Maroons, 28 percent Creoles (non-Maroon Afro-Guyanais), 14 percent Brazilians, and 11 percent Haitians, plus smaller numbers of metropolitan French, Chinese, Hmong, Peruvians, and diverse others. The official language is of course French, with a French-based creole as the *lingua franca* except in western Guyane, where Okanisi serves as the *lingua franca*.¹⁵

Under the new post-civil war cosmopolitan circumstances, Maroon languages and language use, as well as the meaning of Maroon identity, are rapidly changing. There are now some 100,000 people in the world whose first language is Saamakatongo.¹⁶ That language (like all languages) is in constant flux, and it now includes lexical items and ways of speaking adopted during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from external sources such as Sranan, Okanisi, French, Dutch, and more recently Brazilian, Chinese, and Russian—the latter because of the new Soyuz base in Guyane, where a small number of Saamakas are employed. But even beyond that, and their array of ritual languages already mentioned, Saamakas master, to variable extents, generation-specific play languages that add to the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of language use (Price and Price 1976).

In today's urban environments of Suriname's capital, Paramaribo, and the coastal towns of Guyane, Maroons confront identitarian issues of a new kind. In St. Laurent-du-Maroni, on the Guyane side of the border river with Suriname, for example, the population of 60,000 includes at least 46,000 Ndyuka, Saamaka, Aluku, and Pamaka Maroons who interact with one another as well as with Guyanese Creoles, Chinese, Haitians, Hmong, French, and others—in schools, hospitals, administrative offices, and so forth. Ethnic stereotypes remain strong, multilingualism is the order of the day, and questions of nationality matter a great deal. Since 1986, when the civil war broke out, Saamaka life (like that of other Maroons) has experienced a veritable sea change. By the end of the war (1992), Saamaka territory—once relatively sovereign and closed to outsiders—had been opened up to the world outside. Soon, government schools and police, churches of many denominations, the U.S. Peace Corps, large numbers of tourist lodges (and mostly Dutch tourists), Chinese grocery stores, electricity, ubiquitous cell

¹⁵ For further information on the linguistic situation in Guyane, see Renault-Lescure and Goury 2011 and Migge and Léglise 2013.

¹⁶ For Saamaka children born in the Netherlands or the United States, Saamaka is often a second or third language. Saamaka parents in Rotterdam, for example, have sponsored Saturday morning classes in Saamakatongo designed to discourage their children from abandoning the language.

phones and towers, women now covering their breasts and men now wearing blue jeans rather than loincloths, and much else had arrived. Transportation to the capital, even from the most remote villages, soon became a matter of hours rather than days. And interest in (and transmission of) First-Time knowledge, particularly among the younger generations, greatly diminished. Once men were having relations on a daily basis with people of many different ethnicities, including the Whitefolks who had been sworn and eternal enemies, First-Time was almost on the way to becoming folklorized.

Since the civil war, one third of Saamakass have been living in Guyane, where children attend French schools, become literate, and learn to operate in this cosmopolitan setting. In several notable cases they have even gone on to university educations in France. One young woman whose parents remain non-literate and do not speak French has become an epidemiologist; several others are getting their M.A. at Sciences Po in Paris; and many other Saamakass have gone on to attend French universities. Because they have grown up in a South American outpost of France, the relevance of the First-Time exploits of their ancestors in Suriname is severely diminished, becoming a mainly identitarian one, rather than one to be evoked in everyday matters.

Young Saamakass in Guyane grow up in a world of TVs, schools, commercial clothing, electricity, and indoor plumbing, not to mention ethnic diversity and other “Western” aspects of daily life. And when they visit their families’ villages in the rainforest (for example, during summer vacation), they arrive on paved roads, travel between villages by motorboat, speak on cell phones, and have access to outhouses for bathrooms. So, in our more recent writings, we have tried to help them picture the life their parents had left behind by recounting the world we knew in the 1960s and 1970s.

But we have found that explaining to young Saamakass the once-pervasive uses of history in everyday life—the grave spiritual dangers that surrounded the transmission of (or simply the speaking about) First-Time knowledge—has proved much more challenging than alluding to the physical details of life in the villages. For example, the idea that many of the Saamakass we knew in the 1960s were genuinely frightened of Whitefolks is more or less difficult to be persuasive about, depending on the sophistication, age, and life experience of today’s Saamaka reader. At the same time, Saamakass in urban Suriname and Guyane still continue to identify strongly as Saamaka, taking pride in their culture and struggling to maintain their cultural identity even in the face of tremendous

pressures from national political and cultural forces. During the early twenty-first century, traditional Saamaka political leaders fought a last-ditch effort to maintain their people's sovereignty, in the face of incursions by the national government. And in 2007, they won a signal victory.

In that year, with our participation as expert witnesses, the Interamerican Court for Human Rights heard the case of *Saramaka People v. Suriname*, in which the Saamakas, whose traditional territory was in the process of being despoiled (with Suriname government approval) by Chinese and other multinational logging companies, won their case.¹⁷ The Court ruled that the government of Suriname must respect Saamaka territory and sovereignty, and that the ruling extended to other Maroons throughout the Americas, who would henceforth be treated as equivalent to Indigenous Peoples in international law.¹⁸ Unfortunately, more than a decade later, the national government has carried out almost none of the court's orders, and Saamakas are increasingly being integrated into the world that they once considered sharply alien. Indeed, by the time the official organization of the Saamaka People asked us to translate *First-Time* into their own language, and then bought 3,000 copies to distribute in their schools (where youths, traditionally barred from hearing about "First-Time," would read it), it was clear that this knowledge was undergoing a radical shift in meaning and social importance. Traditional authorities (the paramount chief, village captains, and their assistants) were losing much of their power and influence; disputes about clan land ownership were becoming less frequent and relevant; Whitefolks, who had been the prototypical enemy, were now visiting villages as paying tourists; the capital city, once a place of danger and alienation, was now an attractive residence option; and more.

Toward the end of his life, our friend Tooy (a learned and respected Saamaka captain) told us, in a tone of sardonic pessimism: "We once could have confidence in our First-Time *obias*, But nowadays, who knows how much of their powers are left? Let's say someone comes running at you with an axe and you have to choose whether to see if your *obias* are still worth something or to make your escape. Which makes more sense? I'd say, Run for it!" (R. Price 2008: 226–8). And then

¹⁷ See for example, <http://goldmanprize.org/2009/southcentralamerica>. This website includes a five-minute video about the Saamakas' legal victory, narrated by Robert Redford.

¹⁸ Richard Price's *Rainforest Warriors: Human Rights on Trial* (2011) tells the story of the lengthy Saamaka legal battle against the government of Suriname, with much of the testimony that swayed the justices based on First-Time knowledge.

he giggled. There was a real sense of a world on the wane. Today it seems ever clearer that Saamaka collective memory of First-Time—their knowledge of their heroic beginnings as a people—is fading, along with the core of their identity as one of the most remarkable peoples in the African diaspora.

Speech into text: The *Fesibuku* era

Although until recently Suriname Maroon languages have been almost exclusively oral, Maroons have always been well aware of the power that literacy represents, and they maintain a strong interest in the idea of the written word. As early as the 1760s, immediately following their peace treaty with the colonists, they pleaded (largely in vain) with the Whitefolks for schools that would allow them to harness some of that power. The plot of a Saamaka folktale turns on a magical book that grants every wish to the person who opens its pages.¹⁹ And Maroons have always been intrigued by the abstract idea of systems of graphic signs.²⁰ In Saamaka, woodcarvings and engraved calabashes often carry small marks, sending simple messages or identifying the object's owner. An X, for example, is said to thank the person who complements the object's beauty and curse the person who criticizes it. Eastern Maroons have always been even more intrigued than Saamakas by the idea that graphic signs might communicate meaning; in 1908, an Okanisi man literally “dreamed up” a whole script.²¹

Attempts by outsiders to develop an orthography for the Saamaka language began soon after the 1762 peace treaty with the Dutch Crown, when German Moravian missionaries first arrived in Saamaka territory. From 1765 until 1813, thirty-seven Moravian men and women attempted to bring their pietist brand of Christianity to the Saamaka,²² writing biblical texts in the Saamaka language and producing the remarkable Saamakatongo–German dictionary mentioned above. Since that time, there have been others—by the Dutch linguist Jan

¹⁹ For the folktale, see Price and Price 1991: 315–46, 409–10. Other African American versions of “The Talking Book” can be found in Gates 1988: 127–69.

²⁰ This is in spite of their rejection of the idea promoted by outsiders that their graphic arts communicate messages.

²¹ See Dubelaar and Pakosie 1999. No more than a dozen men ever learned this so-called Afaka script, though it has been reinvigorated as a symbol of Okanisi identity by contemporary artist Marcel Pinas—see Chaia 2011.

²² See R. Price 1990, which explores the relationship between Saamakas and missionaries during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Voorhoeve and the R. C. priest Antoon Donicie in the 1960s, by the SIL field linguists Catherine Rountree and Naomi Glock in the 1970s and 80s, and by amateur linguists in French Guiana during the past decade.²³

Most recently, Saamaka linguist Vinije Haabo developed a new orthography and compiled an extensive Saamakatongo–Dutch dictionary. And we have written two books using that orthography with the hope that Saamakas will learn to use it—*Fesiten* (2013) and *Boo Go a Kontukonde* (2016).²⁴

Today, in spite of increased literacy and the omnipresence of social-media devices, middle-aged Saamakas tend to use WhatsApp for voice communication more than they text. A Saamaka woman who lives in her husband's village now calls her mother, who lives two days away by paddle canoe, on her cellphone to find out how she's doing rather than visiting her, as before. But younger people, who have been to school in French or Dutch, also spend hours on social-media texting and reading, often in Saamakatongo. With little concern for orthographic conventions, they express themselves according to their sense of how the language sounds orally, eschewing regularity across texts, but easily making themselves understood by anyone who knows the (verbally expressed) language. Writing, in this context, is a directly communicative tool.

In Guyane, the current situation of Maroons provides an interesting window onto the malleability of Maroon identitarian discourses and ideas about language in the context of rapid assimilation. As Guyane has moved from a sleepy little colony with a population in the tens of thousands at mid-twentieth century to the booming home of the European space center and a population fast approaching the 300,000 mark, France has implemented a program of *francisation* which is designed to bring Guyane more into line in terms of French language, education, values, and lifestyle.

This assimilationist politics has had a profound impact on (among other things) the Maroon art of woodcarving, known in the various Maroon languages as *tembe*. The idea that *tembe* constitutes a secret language, which has always been promoted by enthusiastic but misinformed outsiders, has been elaborated in new directions over the past several decades, especially in Guyane. There, the cooperatives that have been popping up with ever-increasing frequency—often with (literate)

²³ See, e.g., Donicie and Voorhoeve 1963; Rountree, Asodanoe, and Glock 2000 (<http://suriname-languages.sil.org/Saramaccan/English/SaramEngDictIndex.html>); and Lienga 2013.

²⁴ The orthography, which does not use diacritical marks (as earlier proposed orthographies of this tonal language do), mimics the way Saamakas write on their smartphones. (For speakers of the language, it turns out that diacritics are not necessary either for reading or writing the language.)

European directors and (less literate) Maroon artists—are in a privileged position to define, develop, and promote not only the art itself, but also the interpretation of its meanings. And as Maroons move into an ever-more-integrated role within the larger society, that means refitting both forms and interpretive discourses for a market economy, something that the European members of the cooperatives are particularly well equipped to oversee. In the process, widespread/longstanding popular stereotypes about Maroons—most notably the view of *tembe* as a language of graphic signs—are called into service for promotional purposes, and the idea of a vernacular system of coded messages has become omnipresent in books, magazines, exhibit brochures, websites, and media outlets such as radio and television. One of the many coffee-table books put out by one cooperative, for example, asserts: “The symbolic figures ... constitute a kind of lexicon that is transmitted from generation to generation ... Each sign is there both for the way its form contributes to the overall composition and for its meaning. The message can be romantic, moral, humorous, or even insolent” (Doat, Schneegans, and Schneegans 1999).

Claims of this sort have appeared periodically throughout Maroon history, but recently there have been some new twists in the discourse. A coloring book for children called *Colorie Tes Tableaux Tembé!* by a talented Aluku artist named Franky Amete, in a section entitled “A Secret Code,” explains that “*art tembé*” can be studied like a language, with colors playing a significant part in the themes to be expressed. Red, it asserts, represents man and blood, white is woman and beauty, black is earth (soil), blue is the earth (planet), and so on (S. Price 2007). A follow-up volume contains even more extensive claims, placing the origin of *tembe* symbols in the prehistory of Maroon societies:

The art of *tembé* was used as a means of communication among plantation slaves, comparable to secret messages in code. After the slaves escaped their servitude and established themselves on the banks of the river ... it became the written language of a community that had until then been based on an oral tradition.

(Maïs n.d.)

Local cooperatives were making similar claims, taking readers back to the era of slavery to recount the birth of Maroon *tembe*:

Knowledge of escape, charged with vigilance, calling each day on a new creativity. And at the beginning, communication ... The marks of secrecy, the marks of combat ...[A] few lines furtively scratched in the soil. The mark of the Maroon

in full power preparing his flight in complicity ... The trace, the sign, the mark ... Coded messages, discrete, secret, and ritualized ... So many powerful images in these marks for those who knew to find them, to recognize them, to read them, to accept them, to follow them. Once peace came and freedom was won, the Tembe was transformed into an artform.

(Association Mama Bobi 2004, 2015)

This depiction of slave-era origins for *tembe* was a serious eyebrow-raiser, given the decades-long, multi-sited research that had placed the beginnings of Maroon woodcarving in the early- to mid-nineteenth century.

Another coloring book repeated Amete's claim of color symbolism, and went on to assert that Africans fresh off the boats from Africa (the *beaux-sales*) invented a writing system for communication on the plantations that they then used to record the genealogy of each family as well as information on "customs, traditions, culture, and other kinds of information that was indispensable for the transmission of their history and identity" (Maïs n.d.: 2).

Part of the problem with the claim that *tembe* is a communicative language capable of sending messages from men to women can be traced to gender relations in the encounters between outsiders and Maroons. If, indeed, the motifs carry meanings by which the man who makes the carving sends a message to the woman who receives the carving, one would hope that the woman could make out the message from her lover. Because almost all the descriptions of *tembe* in the literature come from male outsiders talking with male Maroons, the question of to what extent women can interpret the symbols has rarely come up. But when women *are* asked about how they read *tembe* designs, the response is universally negative.²⁵

Saamakas in present-day Guyane have in no way allowed outsider interpretations of their artistic life to get in the way of the ongoing creativity that has always characterized vernacular aspects of their life. Take, for example, women's textile arts, in which recent developments have depended on changes in gender roles that came about precisely because of the women's move into the more Westernized/commoditized lifestyle of coastal settings. Although

²⁵ Our own efforts over the past half century to get women to "read" trays, combs, stools, and so forth have resulted in the identification of lots of names for motifs, but no symbolic meanings for them and no messages in the way they were combined. None whatsoever. Nor have the efforts of the Brazilian anthropologist Olivia da Cunha, who has interviewed Okanisi women explicitly about this.

innovation in sewing techniques and designs were always an aspect of women's lives in the villages of the rainforest, the need to adapt to a very different social/economic situation in Guyane gave them increased independence together with increased financial responsibilities. No longer dependent on the cloth and other products bought with the money that men of an earlier generation earned via wage labor, they had both the need to take on more responsibility for their own material life, and the resources that allowed them to do so, most notably through welfare checks, but also stands in the local markets, participation in cooperatives, and other money-earning possibilities that had not been available back in the villages.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Saamaka women in Guyane were inventing new styles and techniques of sewing very much the way their mothers and grandmothers had done back home, (for example, developing a new art of curvilinear designs realized in "reverse appliqué" (S. Price 2003). But by the second decade of the twenty-first century, the experimentation had taken on a new dimension, as women bought sophisticated sewing machines and multi-thread sergers, exploited the technical options that these devices allowed to invent entirely new forms, and began participating in a market aimed at both fellow Maroons and non-Maroon outsiders (S. Price 2020).

For the first time they were turning their creative energy to the elaboration of their own outfits, literally flipping the long-standing Saamaka understanding that decorative sewing was exclusively for men's garments, a thank-you for the goods and services men provided to wives and female relatives. (This of course coincided with a drop in the frequency with which men were donning "Maroon-style" garments such as loincloths and shoulder capes.²⁶)

Unlike the ethnographic techniques we had used to explore Maroon arts for over a half century (in "the field," as well as in libraries, museum collections, and archives), our investigation of twenty-first-century textile arts began taking place to a great extent on Sally's laptop. A several-week-long 2018 visit with women in Guyane opened up the subject, as women introduced her to basic techniques, terms, and ethnic associations (mainly Okanisi vs. Saamaka), but emails and Facebook pages then took over the elaboration of the trend. Questions posed in the Saamaka language on Facebook messaging sites were answered in

²⁶ For special occasions (funerals, holiday festivals, etc.), men often slip a shoulder cape over their Western clothing and sometimes even don a loincloth or a pair of decorative calfbands, but their day-to-day dress is shirts and pants.

Figure 5.3 Maroon women showing off the latest fashion, wrap-skirts sewn in cross-stitch embroidery. (Photo posted on Facebook in 2015 by Steven Alfaisi.)

Saamakatongo, based on the responder's own often-impromptu spelling. Daily postings of people posing for the camera constituted a rich scrapbook of new styles and novel kinds of garments that could then be followed up by emailed questions. And Google searches for "Maroon clothing" led to lively YouTube videos and sites devoted to Maroon cultural events and beauty contests.²⁷ It became clear that Western promoters upped the sensationalist nature of some of the showmanship, but the embroidery designs and techniques were the women's own.

A few traditional items of Maroon dress disappeared in this new fashion world; for example, the frontal aprons that all teenage girls once wore as their sole garment became obsolete except in rites of passage. But other items were retained and newly elaborated. For example, the white calfbands with red/black/yellow stripes in the middle that men, women, and children wore on an occasional basis in the rainforest villages (especially at funeral celebrations) were doubled in size, incorporating lavish multicolor designs and becoming a ubiquitous element of high fashion as well as an art object suitable for display on

²⁷ See, for example, "Sociaal Culturele Vereniging Kifoko" and "Kula Skoro."

a shelf over the television in an urban apartment. And the plain folded squares of cloth that Saamaka women always used to belt their wrapskirts became canvases for elaborate embroidery, often supplemented by written aphorisms.

The role of Saamaka vernacular expression, and the aspects of life in which it plays a part, reflect the changing physical, cultural, social, economic, and political situation of the society itself. The maintenance of a detailed memory of Saamakas' seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ancestors' heroic struggle for independence depended on vernacular forms that fit with the social, political, and cultural life of upriver villages, where there was strong pride in Saamaka identity, strong gender roles that governed the maintenance of that identity's formation, and strong reliance on verbal forms of communication. Once Saamakas moved beyond life in those villages, they entered a whole new universe where their self-image was no longer so fully anchored in a heroic past of self-liberation, where their physical, social, and cultural surroundings were suddenly multi-ethnic, and where they finally had access to the gift of literacy that their earliest ancestors had only dreamed of. It was in this new setting that the novel vernacular forms that we describe were able to emerge.

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