



SAAMAKA DREAMING

RICHARD PRICE AND SALLY PRICE

Saamaka Dreaming

Saamaka Dreaming

.....

Richard Price and Sally Price

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Durham and London 2017

© 2017 Duke University Press
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States
of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Amy Buchanan
Typeset in Quadraat and Quadraat Sans
by Westchester Publishing Services

.....

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Price, Richard, [date] author. |

Price, Sally, author.

Title: Saamaka dreaming / Richard Price
and Sally Price.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016059668 (print) |

LCCN 2017003772 (ebook)

ISBN 9780822369660 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822369783 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822372868 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Saramacca (Surinamese people) |

Saramacca (Surinamese people)—Social life
and customs. | Saramacca (Surinamese people)—

Folklore. | Maroons—Suriname.

Classification: LCC F243L.S27 P753 2017 (print) |

LCC F243L.S27 (ebook) | DDC 988.3/3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016059668>

.....

Cover art: Gravediggers on the river.

Photo: Martha Cooper.

*Most serious and productive artists are “haunted” by their material—
this is the galvanizing force of their creativity, their motivation.
It is not and cannot be a fully conscious or volitional “haunting”—
it is something that seems to happen to us, as if from without.*

JOYCE CAROL OATES

CONTENTS

PREFACE (ix)

CHAPTER 1 Testing the Waters (1)

CHAPTER 2 On Trial (13)

CHAPTER 3 A Feast for the Ancestors (28)

CHAPTER 4 Going “Outside” (34)

CHAPTER 5 On Nai’s Doorstep (40)

CHAPTER 6 Under Kala’s House (51)

CHAPTER 7 The Sika (58)

CHAPTER 8 What Month Is It? (62)

CHAPTER 9 The Captain’s “Granddaughter” (71)

CHAPTER 10 Upriver (74)

CHAPTER 11 At the Ancestor Shrine (86)

CHAPTER 12 The Cock’s Balls (100)

CHAPTER 13 Nai’s Rivergod (103)

CHAPTER 14 Agbago’s Seagod (108)

CHAPTER 15 Kala’s Snakegod (114)

CHAPTER 16 A Touch of Madness (123)

CHAPTER 17 Playing for the Gods (132)

CHAPTER 18	A Tree Falls	(139)
CHAPTER 19	Sickness	(144)
CHAPTER 20	Death of a Witch	(155)
CHAPTER 21	Chasing Ghosts	(173)
CHAPTER 22	Death of a Child	(179)
CHAPTER 23	Returns	(190)
CHAPTER 24	Foto	(202)
CHAPTER 25	Looking at Paper	(205)
CHAPTER 26	The End of an Era	(215)
NOTES		(231)
BIBLIOGRAPHY		(243)
INDEX		(247)

PREFACE

Although we speak a number of languages, the one we learned during the 1960s while living in the Suriname rainforest is the one—other than our native English—that we most often use with each other. It's also a frequent dream language for us both. Our hosts, the Saamaka Maroons, call it Saamakatongo, or simply Saamaka. (Saamakas are the descendants of Africans brought to Suriname in chains who rebelled and escaped in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and established an independent society in the tropical forest.)¹

For political reasons (death threats from the dictator/president of the country), we haven't been able to set foot in the Republic of Suriname since 1986. Since then, our ongoing fieldwork with Saamakas, the source of our knowledge about present-day life in their villages, has been conducted from the somewhat excentric perspective of neighboring Guyane (French Guiana). Following the Suriname Civil War of 1986–1992, about a third of Saamakas moved there permanently, returning periodically for visits to their home villages in Suriname. That turns Saamaka territory, as we knew it in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, into something of a dreamworld for us.

Yet we're still haunted by our Suriname experiences, preserved in ethnographic fieldnotes as well as recordings and photos . . . and memories. This book revisits the life we experienced in Saamaka, particularly during our initial fieldwork of the 1960s—scenes of our youth and a Saamaka world considerably different from that of today.

Among the many Saamakas who dealt with the arrival of the two young outsiders in 1966, receiving them with a mixture of curiosity, suspicion, ambivalence, hostility, and fascination, there were three people who played especially pivotal roles.

Agbago Aboikoni, in his early eighties when we first met him, was the dignified paramount chief (*gaama*) of the Saamaka people. In office since 1951, he presided over a period of increasing pressures from the colonial government to integrate his people into the wider society. It was Agbago who ultimately bore responsibility for deciding whether we should be allowed a trial period of residence in a Saamaka village, with permission for our longer stay to be decided in due course by divination with gods and ancestors after they'd had a chance to assess our intentions. A tall lanky man whose deep bass voice bespoke authority and wisdom, he struck a regal figure, conducting audiences with a combination of solemnity and gentle good humor, always punctuated by proverbs and esoteric allusions. Born in Dangogo, the last village on the Pikilio River, he ruled from the tribal capital of Asindooop, just a half hour downstream by paddle.

Agbago's brother Kala, nearly seventy, was the senior village captain (*kabiteni*) of Dangogo, a village split on either side of the Pikilio, with about three hundred residents. Once our house was built in his neighborhood, he became responsible for us on a day-to-day basis, making sure that we were holding up our end of the bargain that allowed us to stay in Saamaka. Universally known for his "fierceness," Kala closely monitored our adherence to basic rules, most importantly Sally's monthly isolation in the menstrual hut at the edge of the village, and he did his best to act as the gatekeeper for Rich's interviews with particular people. Kala was proud and vain, despite having a mildly crippled leg from an old tree-felling accident. In his relationship with us, he lived up to his stormy reputation, though the ups and downs of our encounters gradually produced an underlying acceptance, and eventually something approaching real friendship.

Their nonagenarian sister Nai had, like her brothers, been raised in Dangogo. During our stay in Saamaka she was the oldest person on the Pikilio and the undisputed doyenne of their matrilineage. No longer able to travel to the camp where she had enjoyed maintaining gardens ever since moving back from her husband's village after his death forty years earlier, she stayed in Dangogo where she was treated as a kind of nerve center for local events. Pregnancies and births, marriages and divorces, trips to and from the coast, and rituals of every kind were routinely brought to her

doorstep for her reactions and advice. The placement of our own house facing that doorstep, just a few yards away, gave us special access for keeping up with the latest events . . . and also allowed her to keep an attentive eye on our own activities. Over time we became very close. Our adoptive kinship relationship was the normal one for people separated by two generations: Rich and Nai were ritualized “husband” and “wife,” while Nai and Sally addressed each other as *kambo*, a playful version of *kambosa* (“co-wife”). When we left in late 1968, Nai—thinking toward her coming death, and concerned that Sally had not yet become pregnant—vowed that when she died she would serve as the *neseki* (namesake, spiritual genitor) of our future child.

Our relationships with Agbago, Kala, and Nai led to others that contributed importantly to our experience in Saamaka. The trials and tribulations of Agbago’s three wives—the aging Apumba, her co-wife Gadya, and their younger rival Kaadi from a Christian village downstream—came under frequent discussion. Kala’s ultra-possessive guardianship of his wife Anaweli’s nubile granddaughter Maame (“Mah-may”) led to some of the most dramatic moments of our stay in Saamaka. And the children and grandchildren of Nai’s deceased daughter were omnipresent in our daily lives.

Faced with stories, observations, and commentaries that filled thousands of pages of fieldnotes we have decided to give this book focus by limiting it to experiences that involved this threesome and their immediate families.

.....

It would be futile to attempt a list of traditional “acknowledgments” to individuals and grant organizations who have provided intellectual and financial assistance at some point over the fifty years covered in this book. But we would like to thank John Collins and Peter Redfield for their helpful comments on a draft and Marty Cooper for sharing her precious photos of the *gaama*’s funeral.

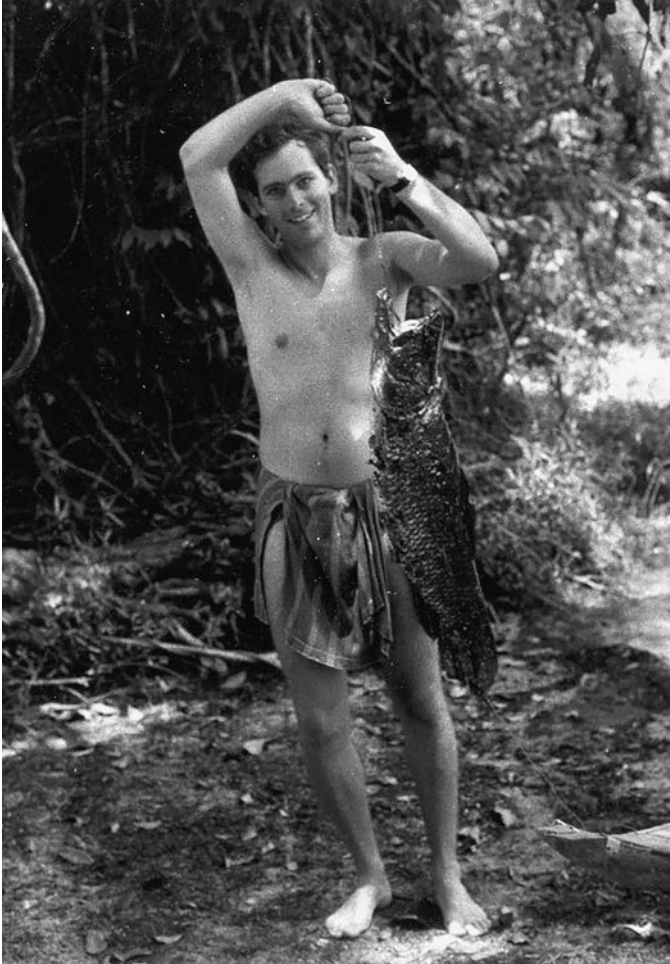
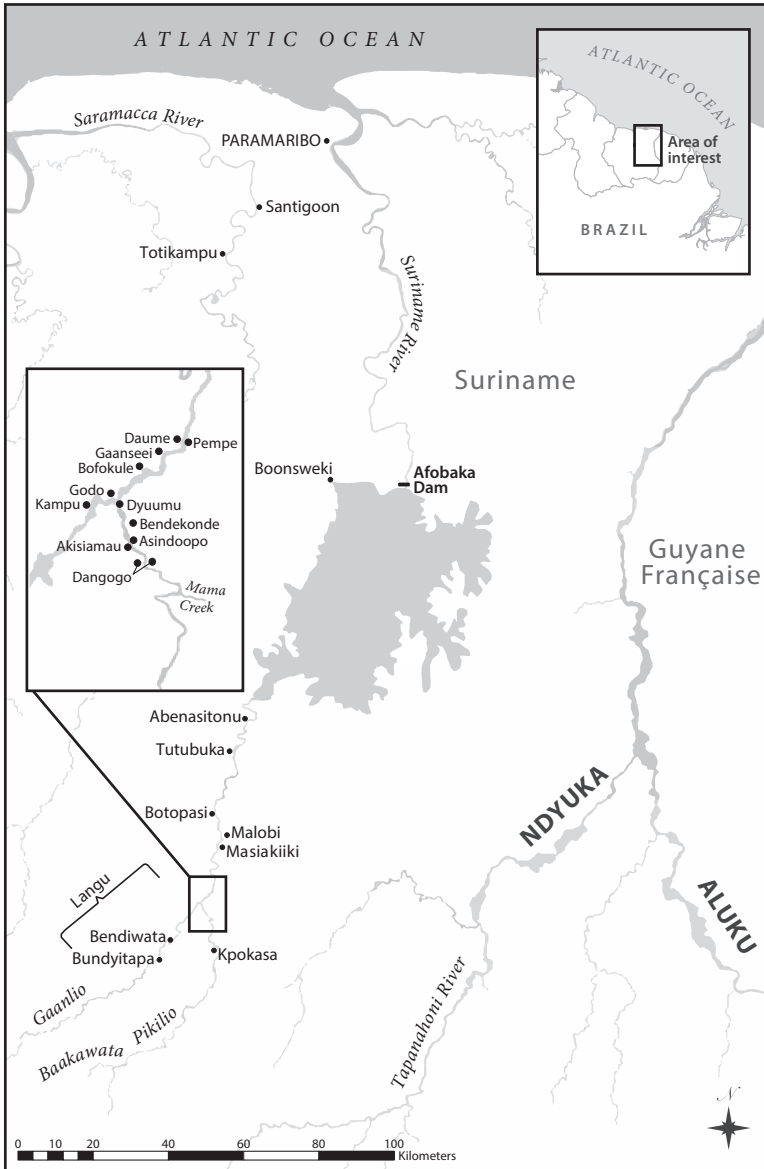


FIGURE PREF.1. Rich with a fish he caught. Photo: S. Price.



FIGURE PREF.2. Sally with a pet monkey belonging to Nai's great-granddaughter Dyam.
Photo: R. Price.



MAP 1.1. Some places mentioned in the text.
Map drawn by Nicholas Rubin.

CHAPTER 1

Testing the Waters

Despite physical discomforts, periods of boredom, ailments ranging from funguses and dysentery to malaria and hepatitis, and periodic ridicule for being culturally clueless, we have always loved ethnographic fieldwork. We recently found a typescript, dated 1972, intended for a book that we started writing in New Haven but never finished. It began:

Whether it's an indication of a certain alienation from our own society, a basic function of the ethnographic process or—as seems likely—some combination of the two, we have always felt life most viscerally while doing fieldwork, whether in Peru, Martinique, Andalusia, Chiapas or, most particularly, Saramaka. For us, in the field, there is a remarkable openness to reality, a switching on of all one's senses, and a fantastic investment in human relations. Life becomes delightfully refreshing.

This retrospective confessional continued, “We truly lived for the summers, spending autumns digesting, writing up, and publishing our last summer's work, and the springs preparing for the next.” That was the mindset that set the course for our professional, and in many ways personal, lives for many decades.

In 1964, the idea of Rich doing dissertation research with people known as “Bush Negroes,” the descendants of self-liberated slaves in the Dutch colony of Suriname, had begun to grow on us. We knew that Melville Herskovits, the founder of Afro-American studies, had considered Suriname's six Maroon “tribes” at one end of his “Scale of Intensity of Africanisms” in the Americas (with Harlem Negroes at the

other, most assimilated, end). We'd read about the research that Dutch anthropologists had recently undertaken among the Ndyuka Maroons of eastern Suriname. And we'd seen the magnificent photographs by French geographer Jean Hurault of proud Aluku Maroons who since the late eighteenth century had lived just over the border with Guyane.

But there was a potential problem. In the 1960s, anthropology was still viewed largely as the study of people who, in that pre-politically correct era, were classified as "primitive," and the Harvard department specified that the Ph.D. could be awarded only to students who had carried out at least three months of fieldwork in a non-Indo-European language. Saamakas, despite their "primitiveness" on almost every other criterion, were ruled out, since at the time scholars considered that all creole languages—including the one spoken by Saamakas—were the bastard offspring of Indo-European languages such as English, French, Portuguese, and Dutch. (That meant that a student could not get a Ph.D. in anthropology at Harvard with a dissertation about, say, Martinique or anywhere in Afro-America. As Caribbeanist Sidney Mintz is said to have joked, "If they don't have blowguns and you can't catch malaria, it's not anthropology.") Rich managed to slip through only thanks to a bizarre loophole. The two summers we'd spent doing fieldwork with Zinacanteco Indians in Mexico, who spoke a Mayan language called Tzotzil, officially met the non-Indo-European language requirement, and he was thus authorized to undertake dissertation fieldwork with Saamakas.

By 1965, we had begun corresponding with Dutch scholars, who warned us that the recent damming of the Suriname River by Alcoa and the colonial government, which had flooded out six thousand Saamakas from their villages in central Suriname, might make the colonial government wary of anyone doing research in the area. But we decided to give it a try. In the summer of 1966, after brief fieldwork in Mexico, we picked up a string hammock in the Yucatan and flew to the Dutch colony, with a brief stop in Papa Doc's Haiti. Our goal: securing permission to carry out fieldwork among the Saamaka, then some twenty thousand people living in seventy villages along the upper Suriname River.

Our memory of the two-week bureaucratic marathon in Paramaribo is of countless hours sitting on wooden benches in lonely government waiting rooms. It was clear early on that our fate depended directly on

District Commissioner Jan Michels—a man whom, we later learned, Saamakas called Tu-Buka-Goni (double-barreled shotgun) because he spoke out of both sides of his mouth. Michels eventually gave us the go-ahead on the condition that we not spend time with the communities displaced by the dam. He also offered to arrange our transportation to the *gaama*'s village and to provide proper letters of introduction.

With our upriver departure set for the following week, we began to be bombarded with well-meant advice by everyone from old government hands who had visited the interior to storekeepers, the East Indian family who'd rented us a room, and the chief of police who had impounded our passports "just in case." We were not taken in by their tales of a jungle teeming with snakes and jaguars and rivers swarming with bloodthirsty piranhas. But we did take the advice of merchants who had outfitted previous mining and scientific expeditions to the interior, purchasing knee-high boots (essential protection against snake bite, they said), U.S. army surplus nylon-and-net zip-up hammocks like those being used in Vietnam ("against vampire bats and malarial mosquitoes"), and certain types of cloth and rum that they claimed were preferred by "Bush Negroes." Once in Saamaka, we learned better. We never once donned the clumsy boots (instead going barefoot throughout our stay) or slept in the coffin-like hammocks. The only resemblance between the cloth we'd bought and that used by Saamakas was that it contained stripes, and the 150 proof rum was much stronger than anything Saamakas drank or even used for libations.

On the morning of our departure we set out in a government jeep for the sweaty, bumpy ride that brought us after several hours to the massive hydroelectric dam at Afobaka. The district commissioner's three Saamaka boatmen—Neiso and his two assistants—were there waiting for us and helped transfer our gear, now covered (like ourselves) with red-brown bauxite dust from the road, to a government motor canoe for the trip upriver. It was only as the boatmen pointed the slim craft out into the artificial lake that we looked back and saw the immensity of the construction, the broad sweep of concrete in between hundreds of meters of high packed red earth, looming up from the fetid water.

At last we were on what Saamakas were still calling "the river," negotiating a tortuous path lined on either side with the bare grey tops of forest giants, standing as skeletal sentinels in a vast space of death. As we followed the course of the twisting, ancient riverbed, far below us,



FIGURE 1.1. Mamadan shrine to the Wentis. O. J. R. Jozefzoon, *De Saramaccaanse wereld* (Paramaribo: Varekamp, 1959), 28.

the Saamaka steersman would point and call out to us the name of each submerged village, buried forever beneath the muddy waters—houses, shrines, cemeteries, gardens, and hunting grounds, places where great battles had been fought and famous miracles effected.

After four or five hours in the eerie silence of the lake, we heard a low roar that grew louder as we approached. Suddenly we broke into the exuberance of the bright green forest and plunging waters of the most famous rapids on the Suriname River, Mamadan, “Mother of all Rapids.” The river rushed at us from all sides, the foaming water coursing through numerous channels and plunging over giant boulders. After the boatmen poured libations on shore at the shrine to the Wentis (gods of the rapids and the sea), we spent a fitful night’s sleep on an island in the midst of this liquid plenitude.¹

It was still early the next morning when we arrived upstream at Abenasionu, Neiso’s home village, and one of the first of the Saamaka villages that had not been sunk by the dam. Our gear was deposited in the house of the Moravian schoolteacher, away on summer vacation, and we were told to wait there while the boatmen continued several days upriver to the village of Asindoopo to ask Gaama Agbago whether they

could bring these whitefolks into Saamaka territory. Four days later, the boatmen returned with formal permission to proceed, and we set out again upstream.

At the time, no outsiders—whether from the government or elsewhere—ventured into Saamaka territory without this nod to the principle that the *gaama*, on behalf of his people, maintained full territorial control. The government’s unilateral decision to build the Afobaka dam had, of course, slashed a deep wound into this long-respected sovereignty. But in 1966, any non-Saamaka setting foot in their territory still did so as a guest of the Saamaka people. For them, the treaty that their ancestors concluded with the Dutch crown in 1762 not only ended decades of bitter warfare but also established three inalienable principles: freedom (from slavery), independence (from the colonial society—the right to govern their own society as they wished), and control over their own territory, stretching from Mawasi Creek (some fifteen kilometers downstream from the dam) to the headwaters of the Suriname River. Gaama Agbago was fond of repeating the litany, “From Mawasi on up, the forest belongs to us.”

During the rest of the upriver journey, we stopped for brief visits in village after village, seeing bits and pieces of a way of life that looked more exotic than anything we’d ever imagined—libations being poured before a gabled coffin as women shrieked in mourning, men sporting shiny gold earrings, bright patchwork capes, embroidered neckerchiefs, umbrellas, variously curved machetes, tasseled calfbands, multicolored beaded sashes across their chests, and hats that varied from berets and fedoras to panamas and pith helmets—evoking for us visions of seventeenth-century pirates of the Caribbean. Between villages, sometimes for an hour at a stretch, we glided next to forest walls of breathtaking beauty, seeing only the occasional fisherman or a woman paddling a small dugout canoe laden with garden produce. Over and over, we passed through foaming rapids, marveling at the boatmen’s skills and knowledge of every twist and turn and rock in the river. Throughout the voyage, we pestered them about Saamaka words, building on our knowledge of Sranantongo (the coastal Creole), which we had learned from a Dutch radio course, and which they spoke as a contact language. Rich was already getting used to being called “Lisati” (the Saamaka pronunciation of Richard) while Sally’s name, easier for Saamakas to pronounce, remained intact.

On the afternoon of the third day, we arrived at Tuliobuka (“Mouth of Two Rivers”) where, over a mighty rapids on our right, the Gaanlio flowed into the Suriname. We entered the left-hand, quieter flow of the Pikilio, which led to the *gaama*’s village several kilometers upstream. A messenger had been sent ahead that morning to alert him of our arrival, but we were told to wait in the canoe until we received permission to disembark. After a half hour baking in the sun, we were led ashore and into Gaama Agbago’s council house, a kind of throne room that took our breath away. Michels had told us that during the reign of Atudendu, Agbago’s immediate predecessor, visitors literally crawled through the doorway until being signaled to rise. The Herskovitses wrote about their arrival in what they called “the Court of the Granman” in 1929, greeted by multiple shotgun salutes and much “hallooing of the women,” and devoted more than half a dozen pages of their book to a description of the council house and its ceremonial stools, umbrellas, and other accoutrements. Even in 2015 a blogger wrote of visiting the Saamaka “King” in his “Royal Palace.”

Our boatmen ostentatiously wiped their feet on the large doormat and bowed down as they entered, and we followed suit. The *gaama* was reposing on a large, cushioned steel chair, flanked on either side by a dozen wicker armchairs set on a platform. He wore a fedora, a tailcoat made from a bright Union Jack, green and blue pinstripe pajama pants, and red high-top basketball sneakers, unlaced. In one of the armchairs, a young man who we later learned was a foster child of the chief named Line (“Lee-nay”), was casually thumbing through a Dutch movie magazine.

The *gaama* motioned to us to come forward, and indicated the two adjoining armchairs. After an exchange with the boatmen about the trip, he recounted some of the history of outsiders visiting Saamaka territory and poured a libation of rum, informing the ancestors of our arrival and asking that they protect us during our stay. Hearing that we’d lived in Martinique, he told us how, in his youth, he had shipped out on a steamship from Belém and how he and his fellow sailors, on shore leave in Fort-de-France, had been arrested and spent time in jail in the wake of a political assassination. He boasted about the size of that ship and gave a vivid imitation of the sounds of its powerful, chugging engines and its foghorn.

When we were finally given an opening to explain the reason for our visit, Rich summoned up his best effort at Sranantongo to outline our

goals, saying we wished to learn how Saamakas lived and mentioning gardening, hunting, woodcarving, and of course language. But because the several weeks we could stay on this visit would be far too short, he said, we wished to return some months hence and stay for two years. Later we realized that he'd been far too direct—as newcomers we had little sense of the subtleties of Saamaka etiquette, let alone the linguistic tools to produce it. The *gaama* answered graciously but non-committally, offering us the use of a wood-frame guesthouse he maintained for government visitors, and inviting us to join him in a ride back to the coast in three weeks, when he was due in Paramaribo for official business. We presented him with several of the gifts we had brought and our meeting was over.

The next morning, we met again with the chief, asking him whether we might arrange to eat our meals with a local family—as we'd done in previous fieldwork in Peru, Martinique, Spain, and Mexico. He answered cordially, but refused, explaining that people moved around a great deal to forest camps and spouses' villages, and offering instead to obtain for us whatever food we needed. He had apparently heard from the boatmen how mosquitoes had been attacking us through the open mesh of our Yucatecan hammock, and generously offered us a sturdy Brazilian substitute.

Our first days in Asindoopo, a village of several hundred people, included frequent periods of boredom and frustration. Complete outsiders, we were tolerated as amusing curiosities by some and as possible sources of tobacco or trinkets by others, but also left alone for long periods. No one seemed to want to take responsibility to engage us. Despite our requests, no one agreed to teach us anything about canoeing or cooking or gardening. Rich spent most mornings fishing in the river and most afternoons with a group of young men playing soccer at the nearby Moravian mission, after which they drank beer and listened to calypsos and soul music on a battery-driven phonograph while pouring over a deck of Nu-Vu playing cards. Sally, visiting village women, was frustrated by quick shifts from cordiality to hostility when she asked questions about harvesting rice, sewing clothes, or carving calabashes. Our handwritten notes from the period report such gems as “Bought one fish from a little boy for 2 fishhooks, but Sally dropped it in the river as she was cleaning it. No one saw.” Children sometimes burst into tears at the mere sight of us—once, when a little boy cried



FIGURE 1.2. Abatili. Photo: R. Price.

at seeing Rich, one of the *gaama*'s wives teased him, "Better get used to it. That's what you'll see when you go to the city." When young men or women took us to nighttime dances in nearby villages, our Saamaka clothes evoked loud hooting and clapping as people pulled and adjusted them to show us exactly how to wear them. Women must have retied the knot of Sally's waistkerchief a hundred times. And late evening visitors to our house would encourage us to get into our hammock if we were tired, saying they would just stay and watch.

Slowly, however, we began to forge relationships. Abatili, a thirty-some "grandson" of the *gaama* who lived in Dangogo, the *gaama*'s natal village a few kilometers upstream, and one of Rich's new soccer-playing friends, took a special interest in us and began sending us small gifts—a bird he'd shot, a carved comb, two eggs. As one of the *gaama*'s official boatmen, he took advantage of his access to an outboard motor to bring us to Dangogo several times. There we met his grandmother

Nai, who gave us a bucketful of oranges on our first visit, and with whom we participated in a large feast in honor of her deceased mother a few days later.

Dangogo was divided between a hilly site where Nai, Kala, Abatili, and their closest relatives lived and a flatter part of the village across the river. Between them rushed a rock-strewn rapids and on either shore there were flat rocks where women cleaned fish, washed hammocks, did their dishes, and engaged in relaxed conversation. Just downstream, on either side, were numerous canoes, all intricately carved on their prows, sterns, and seats, tied up to stakes on the sandy banks. On both sides of the village large clusters of houses, separated by lines of bushes, belonged to particular kin groups, each with its own ancestor shrine. Fruit trees—oranges, limes, breadnuts, mangos, guavas, coconuts, palepu palms brought back from Guyane—calabash and cotton trees, and many varieties of medicinal plants dotted the village.

With the *gaama*'s permission, Abatili took us by paddle for a four-day visit to Kpokasa, his sisters' garden camp on the upper Pikilio. Kpokasa was our first glimpse of a world dominated by natural beauty, plentiful crops, game, and fish—a world treasured by Saamakas as an escape from the tensions of village life. During our stay, we were included according to our abilities and stamina in hunting, cutting roofing materials, house building, rice harvesting, and food preparation along with the close-knit family group, including Abatili and his wife Ina, as well as his three sisters. Naina was a premenopausal woman with striking facial cicatrizations who seemed somewhat skeptical about the two new visitors; Akobo, in her forties, expressed enthusiasm about teaching us Saamaka things; and their younger sister Beki was pretty much a full-time mother for her two sons—ten-year-old Elima, perpetually misbehaving, and Bane (“Bah-nay”), a lively one-year-old still often tied onto her back with a length of cotton cloth—and her outgoing five-year-old daughter Poi. Naina's thirty-year-old son Dosili was also there with his young wife Dyeni and his daughter Seena, whose mother had died giving her birth. In the evening, we all ate our meals together (women in one group, men in another, but within hearing distance) and, when folktales were told around the smoldering fire, we even managed to contribute a crude version of Cinderella in our fast developing but still rudimentary Saamakatongo.



FIGURE 1.3. Dosili. Photo: R. Price.

Our notes from that stay record beautiful nights, our hammock slung in an open-sided shelter under the full moon with, off in the distance, mysterious, somewhat frightening sounds. Rich took the precaution of slipping his machete under our hammock, but they turned out to be agoutis calling out one night, howler monkeys the next. (We never met the jungle beasts we imagined roaring, though later—twice during our time in Saamaka—jaguars came within a few feet of our house in Dangogo and were shot during the night by Dosili.)

Upon our return from upriver, we talked to Abatili about the possibility of living in Dangogo instead of Asindoopo, which because of its political role and relationship to the outside world we thought would give us an atypical view of Saamaka life. He agreed to help us make this request to his grandfather.

When the *gaama* interrogated him about our stay in Kpokasa, Abatili described how many “hands” of rice Sally had cut, what kinds of birds

Rich had shot, how we'd participated in rice hulling and house building, and how we had eaten food from the same pot as his sisters. Apparently satisfied, Agbago said that the next day we would all go to Dangogo and pick out a site for our future house. He also announced that he was taking a government plane to the city in four days, so we would need to leave Saamaka at that point as well. He was clearly skeptical that we'd ever return, despite our having left a cash deposit with Abatili for the house that was to be built in Dangogo during our absence.

Throughout our stay, Gaama Agbago was generous, showering us with gifts almost daily—enamel basins filled with cocoa, tea, condensed milk, cookies, and sugar from the city and kilo upon kilo of rice from local gardens. He included us in the distribution of hunting kills—portions of tapir and wild boar that were routinely presented to him when any man on the Pikilio made a significant kill. One evening he sent a wrap-skirt to Sally and a bottle of cold beer to Rich from his kerosene-powered refrigerator.

By the time our three-week stay was over, we had participated in a variety of rituals—a funeral, a feast for the ancestors, the installation by the *gaama* of a new village captain, ceremonies for snakegods and forest spirits, and numerous rites at the ancestor shrine. We had seen a good deal of spirit possession. We had visited a number of neighboring villages, often being given a raucous welcome by dozens of women and children clapping and hooting all around us. We had attended secular and ritual dances, some lasting all night. We had gathered much preliminary information about gardening, learned the names and locations of the forty-three villages that had disappeared underneath Alcoa's lake, and begun to understand the rudiments of material culture, from calabash carving to house construction. More important, our initial use of Sranantongo had shifted into a workable command of Saamakatongo.

The final page of our joint notebook from that summer contains a list of what to bring when we returned: a twelve-gauge shotgun, fishing gear, a machete, a small hammock for use in the menstrual hut, dozens of lengths of cloth, and a kerosene lantern, as well as a portable typewriter, paper, and carbon paper. Our visit to the Pikilio had lasted several days longer than that of the Herskovitses, who wrote *Rebel Destiny* on the basis of their trip, but we were well aware that we'd hardly scratched the surface.

On our way downstream, a couple of kilometers above the site of Mamadan, our canoe slid down through a final rapids to meet the flat brown waters of the artificial lake. Although the surrounding forest was still as green and vibrant as when we'd come upstream, the "Mother of All Rapids" had disappeared forever beneath Alcoa's rising waters.

NOTES

Preface

1. In 2010, the people known to outsiders as “Saramaka” requested to be recognized as “Saamaka,” their own pronunciation of their name.

Chapter 1. Testing the Waters

1. Later, we learned that long ago two girls from a nearby village had drowned when their canoe sank at Mamadan. Eventually (some people say it was seventeen days, others three months, others a year) one of them appeared on a river rock in the rapids. When she had been ritually “cured” and could speak once again, she told of having been taken to the beautiful underwater palace of the Wenti-gods, where she was waited on by a bevy of young girls. She eventually returned, she said, because she missed salt (which Wentis do not eat) and begged them to bring her up to the surface. Older men have told us how, throughout the first half of the twentieth century when on their way to the coast to work, they would stop at the Wenti shrine at Mamadan and pour an offering of white kaolin water, and then, on their way back with their canoes laden with whitefolks’ goods, they would pour offerings of sugarcane syrup. For more on Wentis, see chapter 14, “Agbago’s Seagod.”

Chapter 2. On Trial

1. Sally had sewn a pocket onto the inside of Rich’s shoulder cape; her own notepads were harder to conceal, and she often had to rely on memory until she could get back to our house, since she felt uncomfortable writing in other peoples’ presence. Clandestine note taking was standard ethnographic procedure at the time and was unquestioned from the perspective of professional ethics. Indeed, one rather complexly worked out technique for secretly taking fieldnotes in a pants pocket (using a two-inch piece of pencil and 2×3-inch pieces of paper