R. Price

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RICHARD PRICE

KWASIMUKAMBA'S GAMBIT¹

One day in 1975, some nine years after I had begun my research among the Saramaka maroons (*Bosnegers*) of Suriname,² I was told a story about a man named Kwasimukamba. During the next summer, as I continued my historical investigations on the formative years of this society, I encountered related historical fragments which considerably enriched the initial account. Then, in 1977, while examining documents in the Algemeen Rijksarchief in The Hague, I came upon written evidence that permitted me to infer that the man known to Saramakas as Kwasimukamba was none other than "The Celebrated Graman Quacy", to whom eighteenth-century writers had devoted many pages, and who, they seem to have agreed, was "one of the most Extraordinary Black men in Surinam, or Perhaps in the World" (Stedman 1790:759). I realized, in other words, that I was in possession of a detailed image of this man, preserved orally by Saramakas for over 200 years — one that was completely independent of the rich contemporary written sources.

This paper considers and compares, in summary form, these two separate historical traditions about Kwasi.³ It is intended not only as a contribution to Suriname history, but also as a modest example of the still too little explored potential of combining intensive oral and documentary research for the "study of the past in non-literate societies.

I

Let us begin with Kwasi's image in written sources, the great bulk of them contemporary.⁴ Born "on the coast of Guinea" about 1690 (Sted-

RICHARD PRICE received the degree of A.B. in History and Literature and the Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Harvard University. He is Professor of Anthropology and Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, The Johns Hopkins University. Prof. Price's current research focuses on maroon ethnography and history. His recent publications include: *The Guiana Maroons*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, and *Maroon Societies: rebel slave communities in the Americas*, second edition, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. Prof. Price's address is: Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 21218, U.S.A.

man 1796, II: 346), he must have been transported to Suriname as a child, for he claimed "that he Acted as Drummer and Beat the Alarm on his Master's Estate when the French Commodore Jacques Cassard put the Colony under Contribution which was in the Year 1712" (Stedman 1790:762). Little is known of his early life, but about 1730 he discovered the medicinal properties of the tree which Linnaeus named, in his honor, *Quassia amara* ("Quassi-bitter"), a popular eighteenth-century febrifuge about which the enthusiastic Linnaeus later wrote a treatise and which remains in common use among Surinamers today (Stedman 1790:762; *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. Quassi-bitter). During the course of the next sixty years, amidst all his other activities, Kwasi became the colony's leading *dresiman* (curer) and *lukuman* (diviner), with vast influence "not only among blacks and Indians but also among the European colonists" (Lichtveld and Voorhoeve 1958: 169). He was, as Wolbers wrote (1861:436), taken to be "an *obia-man*, a wonder-worker, yes, even a god".

Several contemporary writers have left detailed descriptions of Kwasi's divinatory and medical talents (e.g., Hartsinck 1770:906; Stedman 1796, 11:346-48; Nassy 1788, 11:71-75). That of Nassy, written soon after Kwasi's death, typifies the awe and ambivalence with which the most highly educated Surinamers apparently regarded him (I quote only selected portions).

The Negro Quassy, who gave his name to the wood which he discovered and who made himself famous in Suriname through his reputed sorcery, engaged for a long period of years the minds of most of the colonists. He was often employed to go to the plantations to discover the poisoners among the Negroes; he was consulted on all sorts of illnesses, even to give remedies for the sterility of women. The acuteness of his intellect, the considerable knowledge which he was able to acquire from the Indians among whom he was almost continually, an austere and majestic tone (accompanied by a colossal figure) which he knew how to employ when he spoke to the Negroes, procured for him so great an influence among them that they respected him as a priest to whom God deigned to reveal His orders... [He had] sufficient influence among the whites so that no one refused to consult him directly for all their needs. But such excessive confidence caused him to abuse the kindness of the whites and led to many false accusations against the Negroes. For, relying too greatly on his knowledge, he did not make sufficiently accurate researches, nor did he observe the appearances and the operation of an accused conscience, which often reveals itself upon the countenance. For it is only by this method, accompanied by good information on the part of the Negroes which he knew how

to acquire in advance, that he was able in some cases to find out things which appeared to be most hidden ...

[He was once, for example, "unmasked"] in regard to a gold ring [thimble] of the type which women are accustomed to wear when they sew.

Six months after a poor Négress had been cruelly whipped as the thief of this ring, following the divination of Quassy, the master of the house received from his correspondent in Holland, to whom he had sent a case of several small bottles of the jams of the country, a letter of thanks, conveying his respects to his wife because she had prepared the jams with her own hands, and sending back to her her gold ring which he had found in one of the small bottles. A thousand frauds of this nature occurred in the case of this reputed sorcerer, who nevertheless had much knowledge and who died in 1787 without anyone's having extracted from him any secret at all [Nassy 1788, 11:71-75].

Kwasi's fame, however, was not based solely on his supernatural gifts. For more than four decades he was the colony's principal intermediary in dealings with runaway slaves, serving first as a scout, then as a negotiator, and finally as the spiritual and tactical advisor of the specially selected black troops who fought alongside European mercenaries in the great battles of the 1770s and 1780s. As early as 1730, Kwasi was publicly "recognized" when Jan van Sandick, a member of the Council of Policy, presented him with "a golden breastplate on which was inscribed 'Quassie, faithful to the whites'" (van Sijpesteijn 1858:92). In early 1743, Governor Mauricius reported that Kwasi had just located a village of runaway slaves in the Saramacca Creek (Para) area, and that he was planning to lead another expedition against maroon villages to the area west of Paramaribo during the dry season (SS 199, 6-3-1743). (For a sketch map including all place names mentioned in the text, see Plate 1.) The following year, Governor Mauricius himself purchased Kwasi, ostensibly to work with a mineral exploration project and to help search for Indian slaves. "But it seems that Mauricius, who by then already had in mind the idea of making peace with the Bush Negroes, had also secretly assigned Kwasi the task of feeling out this possibility, and setting the process in motion" (van Sijpesteijn 1858:93). The governor's confidence in Kwasi is further indicated by his having entrusted his youngest son to this slave, "to be taught the Negro-English, Carib and Arawak languages, in which Kwasi was fully fluent" (van Sijpesteijn 1858:93). In 1745, when Mauricius' enemies accused Kwasi of criminal dealings regarding the Indians, Free Negroes came all the way from the Coppename River to defend him (SS 200, 25-2-1745/6-3-1745).

PLATE 1. Sketch Map of Part of Suriname Showing the Places and Rivers Mentioned in the Text.

Meanwhile, Kwasi continued his military activities against the maroons. In 1747, he accompanied Captain Brouwer on a large expedition far up the Saramacca River (SS 280, 4-12-1747; 201, 11-12-1749), and in 1750 Kwasi represented the Governor in new negotiations with the Coppename Free Negroes (who had been free since the treaty of 1684). On the return trip from this latter mission, two runaway slaves were shot, with Kwasi bringing back their hands, "new proof", according to Mauricius, "of the fidelity of this slave, who has returned [from this expedition] half-lame, with swollen legs" (SS 201, 16-10-1750).⁵

I skip over, for the moment, Kwasi's activities as a secret agent and negotiator with the Saramakas during the 1750s, mentioning only that in December 1755 he was rewarded for these extraordinary services to the colony with a letter of manumission (SS 203, 29-12-1755). Freedom impeded none of Kwasi's accustomed activities. In the early 1760s, he helped negotiate and maintain the new peace with the Djuka maroons and to arrange the return of various recent runaways to their owners. (He appears from the documentary account of these transactions to have been a remarkably astute negotiator, who could count equally on the trust of the Djukas and the whites [SS 154, 17-54762, 27-9-1762, 28-9-1762].) He also continued to conduct expeditions and capture runaways on his own, receiving the Standard bounties plus, on occasion, special rewards (SS 154, 26-10-1763, 8-11-1763, 14-11-1763, 12-12-1763). Kwasi also became, during this period, a planter in his own right. In 1769, a Moravian missionary reported that:

The Negro Quassie, who is famous because he showed the salutary effect of the Quassia tree, has established a plantation on the Perica Creek, and he has persuaded some Carib Indians to come and provide labor for him. In order to get more of them to come, he had spread a rumor that the Europeans are killing off the Indians and, in addition, that the end of the world is imminent, that the earth will be flooded and burned, and only his plantation will not be destroyed. Therefore all the Garibs should come to work for him. We heard that this story had been spread all the way to the Coppename River, and that several Indians were already flocking from there to the Perica. Others, however, have stayed and have built themselves houses on high stilts, so that they will not be drowned [Staehelin 1913-19, III, 1:118].

Kwasi's Perica plantation received a serious blow when, in 1772, it was sacked by maroons, and Kwasi — though over eighty years old — was reported to be recruiting slaves to accompany him on a punitive expedition (SS 207, 10-1-1772). Some months later he himself marched

as part of a large expedition (SS 164, 14-9-1772), and toward year's end he received from the Government a "douceur" of f 500 for his assistance with the so-called Vrij Corps (SS 164, 10-11-1772). Stedman (1790:760) commented on Kwasi's special relationship to the manumitted slaves (Vrij Corps) and Black Rangers who fought on the side of the colonists against the maroons:

The Corps of Rangers and all fighting free negroes are next under his Command, to whom foy selling his *Obias or Amulets* to make them invulnerable (they, under the Power of this Superstition, fearing no danger and fighting like bulldogs) he not only has done a Deal of good to the Colony but fill'd his pockets with no inconsiderable profits. Also ... his Person is Adored and Respected like a God.

In 1773, Kwasi served for the last time in one of his characteristic roles, as interpreter and mediator in dealings with Indians (SS 165, 3-5-1773). And in 1776, the Governor bestowed the "gifts of the Sociëteit [van Suriname]" upon Kwasi, making at the same time a formal speech thanking him for his recent services in regard to the Vrij Corps (SS 207, 29-10-1776). This was the year, also, in which Kwasi was sent all the way to The Hague, to be received by Willem V, Prince of Orange, who fêted him with gifts. Among other things, Kwasi was given "in a compliment from His Highness, a broad gold-laced coat and hat, with a white feather, a large gold medal, a gold-headed cane and silver gilt hanger. The fellow had two chests of wine and all free" (Stedman, in Thompson 1962:185). It was in this guise, after Kwasi's triumphant return to Suriname, that Stedman drew his famous portrait of "the celebrated Graman Quacy", which was later engraved by William Blake, and which is reproduced in Plate 2. (On this costume, see also Stedman 1796, II: 346, 348 and Wolbers 1861:436.)

Kwasi's labors for the colony were still not finished. In 1781 Governor Texier employed his services once again as mediator-arbitrator with the Vrij Corps, to persuade them to accept certain conditions of employment (Wolbers 1861:373). However, during the remainder of his last decade, Kwasi — who had by then become accustomed to receiving letters from abroad addressed to "The Most Honorable and Most Learned Gentleman, Master Phillipus of Quassi, Professor of Herbology in Suriname" (*De Hoog Edelen en Hoog Geleerden Heer, de Heere Philippus van Quassi, Professor in Kruidkunde in Suriname*) (Lichtveld and Voorhoeve 1958:168) — apparently lived in peace and comfort, "in a good house in Paramaribo, which was given him for his use, free of charge,

by the Government, along with the services of two slaves" (Wolbers 1861:436).

I would suggest, incidentally, that Kwasi was a paradoxical figure for the white colonists. His cleverness, wealth and renown must have posed a threat to the contemporary image of "the Negro's proper place". Although Kwasi seems to have been a master at playing a large number of contextually appropriate roles, the ambivalence with which contemporary whites regarded him is clear. The satirical "mourning poems" composed at his death stress, for unmysterious reasons, his more "ridiculous" side; but the fact that they were written at all is a remarkable testimony to the influence of Kwasi on contemporary Suriname society.

II

With this biographical sketch in mind, we may return to the events of the 1750s, when Kwasi's life intersects with Saramaka history. Let us begin with an examination of these events from the viewpoint of the documents,⁶ saving the Saramaka vision of them for later.

By 1749, the guerrilla war between the colonists and those runaway slaves known as Saramakas had lasted for over half a century. But in that year, Governor Mauricius finally persuaded the Hof van Politie (Council of Policy) to make an attempt at peace, and — in the wake of a large military expedition to the Saramakas — a cease-fire was agreed upon by both parties. The next year, however, this temporary peace was violated and the previous state of chronic war reestablished. It was in this setting that the news reached Paramaribo, on 2 November 1753, that a group of Saramakas had raided and sacked a plantation on the Cassewinica Creek, taking away with them about seven slaves (SS 145, 2-11-1753). Then, some eleven months later, one day in October of 1754, Kwasi suddenly appeared out of the forest and announced to his surprised master that he had spent the past year living amongst the rebels. The record of Kwasi's subsequent interrogation by the Council of Policy (SS 294, "okt. 1754") helps connect these two events.

He says that he had gone to the Cassewinica for medical reasons ... and was taken away along with some nine or ten other slaves, small and large, when the runaways raided there. He believes this must have occurred some twelve to fifteen months ago. After a journey [part on foot, part by canoe, described in some detail] they arrived at the landing place of the runaways ... He said further: that the village was very strong and thickly populated; that it is the same village with which Captain Creutz had made the peace [in 1749].

After providing strategic data of considerable import to the colonists, Kwasi described his "escape" back to slavery.

Not long ago a group of runaways decided to raid the fields of the Castilho plantation, next to Rama [on the Suriname River] because it was not well-defended. Toward this end, they prepared and dried manioc, peas, groundnuts, and corn, in order to go down the Saramacca River by canoe and launch the attack from behind.

It was during this raid that Kwasi slipped back over the invisible border that separated Saramakas from slaves, and he now assured the whites that he was both eager and fully equipped to lead a major expedition against the Saramakas.

He said that if they [the whites] would bring him to the Sara Creek, he would be able to recognize the route ... by proceeding along the river until they reached the landing place, moving from one of his [previous] night campsites to the next. But he warned that the trip is very long and probably takes some three months, and he has heard that the Bush Negroes have patrols out and sentries posted, with instructions to poison the rivers and streams if the whites are seen to be coming.

Within the year, Kwasi's plan was realized and a massive expedition was organized, comprising some 500 men. The purpose as expressed by the Governor: "either to make one last attempt at a permanent Peace or else to set up positions in the [rebels'] villages, and insofar as possible search them out and completely destroy them" (SS 202, 9-12-1754). Captain E. G. Hentschel was chosen as commanding officer, and his report of the expedition (SS 297, 16-9/25-12-1755) represents the most detailed of all such military reports I have seen regarding Saramakas.

On November 17, after two months of extraordinary difficulties, hacking their way through thick forest and dragging themselves over innumerable rapids, the expedition finally arrived at the foot of a rapids, where Kwasi declared,

that this was surely the true landing place of the runaways, from which he had escaped a year ago; that a half-da/s walk from there was a garden, but that as he saw no new "marks" he was not sure whether he remembered the exact pathj that he believed that because of his escape, the runaways had now abandoned this landing place, as they always did when one of their prisoners ran off; and that further evidence was the lack of any sign of recent use, including the absence of canoes at the landing place.

PLATE 2. Blake's Engraving of Stedman's Portrait of "the celebrated Graman Quacy".

During the next two days contact was made with the rebels, and fire-fights occurred. On November 20th, after a day of intermittent battles, Commander Hentschel wrote in his journal that,

The runaways are always swarming around [the periphery of] the camp, yelling out to us that we shall never reach the fourth village [they had thus far found and destroyed three]. Kwasi answered them back, taunting and scolding, shouting out that the whites were justified, and that [while] they were the ones who had come, *he* was the one responsible.

The following day, after fighting off a vicious ambush, Hentschel arrived in a large village that only moments before had been put to the torch by the Saramakas. Using the 10 houses still found standing, he established a new base camp, and secured all remaining provisions. Meanwhile, the runaways continued to surround the camp, making a "terrible racket" which reduced the slaves who accompanied the whites to a state of great anxiety. Hentschel wrote that,

According to Kwasi the runaways are [several] thousands, and to judge by the shrieks and yells we hear constantly around us, this does not seem unlikely.

Hentschel, however, was still trying to decide whether a peace attempt might succeed.

I asked Kwasi today if the runaways might be inclined to make peace, and he replied that he believed they would never agree or, if they appeared to, it would only be a ruse, since he knew that they had sworn never to make peace with whites.

The following days were spent in search-and-destroy missions, resulting in the destruction of several villages, including that in which the "Gouverneur" of the runaways had lived. There were heavy casualties on both sides. On November 27, after the runaways had fired several shots at the troops,

One of our sub-officers yelled out to them to stand fast, that he had a message for them. They replied that we should send two men to them, who would not be harmed, whereupon they were told [instead] that they should send two to us, who would not be harmed. But they did not dare to do so. So, I sent an old slave, named _____ [the name is illegible to me], with the message that we were willing to make peace with them and that they should send one or two emissaries to me, as I would to them ... They replied that they would provide us with whatever pro-

visions we required from their gardens as long as I would turn over to them two barrels of gunpowder and the guide Kwasi.

Two days later, the Saramakas requested that a slave be sent to them to receive a message, and the same old man was sent out. He reported that the rebels were insisting on the "two barrels of powder and Kwasi", and that,

I should send them one soldier who can speak Negro-English well, and two Creole-slaves.

The soldier who volunteered to go to them returned an hour later with this report:

The runaways have only two demands: the two barrels of powder and Kwasi. If these were met, they would within a day bring all needed provisions to our boats.

They gave the soldier several symbolic messages as well:

He was given a long and a short rope, in order to indicate that if we gave them the powder, our journey would be short but if we did not, it would be very long and difficult, and that we would be attacked with arrows. They also sent us some bananas and an arrow in order to signify that if we gave them powder, we would be given bananas and otherwise we would be attacked by arrows.

The expedition by this time was sorely in need of provisions, subsisting by then largely on manioc cakes. Hentschel noted that 19 whites and 14 slaves were sick or wounded, and that he himself was suffering from a high fever.

The following day, the Saramakas again requested that an emissary be sent.

I sent the old slave once again but with the message that they will receive neither powder nor the guide [Kwasi], and that we can never make peace with them on those conditions.

The old man never returned, and the next day it was decided to leave for the city, where the expedition finally arrived on Christmas day, 1755, after more than three months in the forest. This was the last significant wartime expedition to Saramaka.⁷

III

Let us next turn to the Saramaka image of Kwasi, exploring the current significance of this man for Saramakas, some two and a quarter centuries after the fact.

Perhaps the central theme in Saramaka historiography is that of "betrayal". During the war years, betrayal was a signal concern for maroons throughout the Americas (Price 1973:16-18), but in Saramaka this concern has continued to inform behavior toward kinsmen as well as strangers right into the present. Saramaka proverbs and folktales are filled with morals about not trusting other people, and self-defensive posturing and manipulation permeate interpersonal relations (see Price 1975:31-37). I present here a folktale that is in many ways emblematic of this concern and, as we shall see below, holds particular relevance for an understanding of the Saramaka image of Kwasimukamba.⁸

There was a great hunter called Basi Kodjó. He had hunting dogs that were killing off all the "Bush Cows" in the forest [Bush Cows are a mythical animal, resembling — but fiercer than — a tapir]. Finally, the Bush Cows held a council meeting. They said, "What can we do to kill this man? Soon there will be none of us left." One of them, a female, spoke. 'Til go to him. I have a plan to lure him back here so we can kill him." And she changed herself into a beautiful woman, in order to trick Basi Kodjó.

She arrived in his village with a basket on her head, saying that the man who could knock it to the ground would become her husband. She was really beautiful! No one could do it. Finally, Basi Kodjó tried, and the basket fell. So, this beautiful woman [really the Bush Cow in disguise] became his wife. Every night, when they were in their hammock, making love, she would ask Basi Kodjó what his secret was, how it was that he was able to kill so many Bush Cows without their ever hurting him. Each night she asked, and each night he told her a little more. She was so beautiful!

Often, during the night, the woman would go out behind the house to stare at the row of Bush Cow skulls that her husband had nailed against the rear wall, as trophies. She would weep and weep, silently, for her dead relatives. When she had finished crying, she would return to the house, and Basi Kodjó would ask, "Where have you been?" "I went to urinate", she would say. But every few minutes she would go back out and just stare at those skulls and weep.

Every night, she asked Basi Kodjó over and over, "Those animal skulls at the back of your house. How in the world did you kill those animals? They're fiercer than any animal alive!"

One night, Basi Kodjó finally told her: "Woman, those animals live in savannahs. I go all the way to the middle of the savannah and fire my gun. When they come charging, I toss my gun aside and climb an *awara* [palm] tree. The animals circle round and furiously chew at the trunk to fell it. Meanwhile, my mother is back in the village, stirring the boiling pap that she feeds to my hunting dogs at the proper moment, to excite them. When I see

that the palm tree is about to fall, I turn myself into a chameleon, sitting on the trunk, and I call out 'fiiiii', and this makes the trunk grow even thicker than it was at first. I do this until I know that the dogs have had time to gobble up all the boiling pap, and really feel it. Then I let the tree fall. By then, the Bush Cows have realized that I am the chameleon, so I turn into a spot of sand. When they try to eat that up, I use my final disguise and turn myself into a ...". Just then, Basi Kodjó's mother shrieked from her house, "Basi Kodjó. Basi Kodjó. Hurry. Snake. Snake!" [It was really the god in her head that was calling out.] Basi Kodjó jumped out of his hammock and ran to kill the snake. When he got to his mother's house she pulled him close and whispered: "There's no snake. But I must warn you. That beautiful woman is not really a woman! Don't tell her the last thing you know how to turn yourself into. Instead, tell her that you become a *nóuna*." Basi Kodjó returned to his wife. She said, "that thing you were about to tell me, the very last thing you turn yourself into, when the Bush Cows come charging at you, what is it?" He said, "I become a *nóuna*" [a nonsense word, a word with no meaning]. At last, she was satisfied. They slept.

In the middle of the night, the woman arose very quietly and went to her basket and took out a razor. She prepared to cut Basi Kodjó's throat. Basi Kodjó's gun said, "I will shoot her *kpóól*" His cutlass said, "I will cut her *vélévélevélevéV*" His magical belt [*óbiatadì*] said, "I will tie her *kilikilikilikili*". All the posts of the house groaned loudly *hiiiii*. Basi Kodjó awoke with a start, saying, "What's going on?" She answered, "I have no idea. I was asleep." Not a single thing in the house slept during the rest of the night.

At dawn, the beautiful wife asked Basi Kodjó to go off to the forest with her to collect awara palm seeds. He told his mother to prepare the pap for the dogs. And they set off. The woman led him deeper and deeper into the forest until they finally reached the savannah. Basi Kodjó climbed the awara tree and began picking fruit. Suddenly, the woman turned back into her natural form, a Bush Cow, and called out to her relatives. In a moment, the savannah was black with bush cows, all coming to eat Basi Kodjó. Quickly, he turned himself into a chameleon. She told them he was now the chameleon. So they began felling the tree. When it finally fell, they couldn't find the chameleon. She said, "Eat that spot of sand. It is Basi Kodjó." After a while, they could not find the sand. Basi Kodjó had turned himself into a tiny awara palm thorn, and hidden himself by sticking himself into a leaf. She said, "Destroy the *nóuna*. He's turned himself into a *nóuna*." The Bush cows milled around in confusion. None of them knew what a *nóuna* was!

Meanwhile, Basi Kodjó's hunting dogs, who by then had finished eating their boiling pap and had been untied, arrived on the scene and they ripped every last Bush Cow to shreds. Except for one.

Basi Kodjó saw that this last Bush Cow was pregnant, and he called off the dogs. This Bush Cow was hiding in a cave near a stream. She called out, "Basi Kodjó, have mercy. You're about to kill your own of f spring!" He grabbed her by one side, ripping off the whole leg, and then shoved her back into the cave.

Now you know the importance of *nóuna*.

The central theme of this tale, and a cornerstone of Saramaka morality, is that knowledge is power, and that one should never reveal all of what one knows.

I wish next to argue that Kwasi represents, in Saramaka historiography, the identical concerns expressed in the *nóuna* folktale, that for Saramakas he is the prototypical symbol of betfayal. Let us examine briefly the key aspects of Saramakas' accounts of the man they call Kwasimukámba.⁹ First, he is known as a guide who led the whites on various military expeditions beyond the plantation area (geographical references in these oral historical fragments permit me positively to identify these expeditions with those reported in the archives during the 1740s). Next, they believe that he led the whites far upriver in an attempt to make peace. (We may equate these traditions, in part at least, to Brouwer's expedition of 1747 — see above.) But most important, they know him as a self-appointed secret agent, a spy who almost brought about a terrible defeat which, thanks to the Saramakas' gods, was transformed into a famous victory. The following accounts, which are verbatim transcripts, clearly represent the "other side" of the documentary accounts outlined above.¹⁰

One day, Kwasimukámba told the whites he could find the way to Baákawáta [one of the remote areas in which Saramakas then lived].¹¹ "Let me go all by myself", he said. "I'll deceive them ... préparé them until they're 'ripe' [for plucking]". And that is what he tried to do.

Kwasimukámba came all alone. He went and made peace with them at Baákawáta. He said he didn't come to do mischief. He arrived and became their *mdti* [close friend], and they lived together for a long while.

When Kwasimukámba came to Baákawáta, Ajakô [the Saramaka chief] received him like a *mdti*. Over and over again, Kwasimukámba used to ask Ajakô to reveal the secret of his *óbia* [which made him invulnerable]. Ajakô trusted him, until one day Wámba [an *apüku* (forest spirit) god who spoke through Ajakô's sister Jaja] warned him, "Evil is on the way, beware". So Ajakô decided to trick Kwasimukámba! He told him that his power resided in the small stand of sugar-cane growing at the rear of his house. Ajakô

said that if the sugar-cane were shot at until it withered and dried, he would die.

Before the year was up, Kwasimukámba went downstream [to the city]. One day, they [the Saramakas] simply didn't see him any more. Then he went and loaded those soldiers into boats *silili* [intensifier, indicating how very many there were]. He led diem all the way up the river until they were very close.

Then one day, at cock's crow, Wámba appeared in Jaja's head and sang out:

Lukéin o, banángoma hesi é.
 Lukéin o, banángoma hesi o.
 Kwasimukámba tjai kibamba.
 [Repeat first 3 lines.]
 Banángoma hesi o.¹²

It was saying, "they've come. That Kwasimukámba who disappeared. Well, he didn't just disappear. He's returning!"

They went and consulted the great *obia* pot. It was boiling! [indicating danger]. And that very day, the whites arrived.

They abandoned the village as the whites approached and hid at the edge of the forest. When the whites arrived, Kwasimukámba showed them the small stand of sugar-cane. They stood shooting it for so many hours! But it did not dry up. Their ammunition was finished. Then, Ajakó appeared, with his cutlass. He fought with them. He cut off every single head except that of Kwasimukámba. Then Ajakó said to him, "Kwasimukámba, when I gave you food, you ate till your belly was full. Now look what's become of you. Well, I am not going to kill you. But I will fix you so that everyone will laugh at you." Then he grabbed him, and stretched his ear out hard like this [demonstrates the stretching of his right ear]. And then he sliced it cleanly off!¹³ Kwasimukámba said, "This is one heel of a thing for Kwasimukámba of Tjedü! When a person's ear is cut off, his face is spoiled!"¹⁴ And he left for the city. [Some people say he actually "flew" off.]

The remarkable parallels between the *nóuna* folktale and the Saramaka accounts of Kwasimukámba's exploits should be clear: the sending in of a secret agent who is nearly successful in extracting the ultimate secret; the timely warning by a god, speaking through an old woman; the final victory, in which the enemy is decimated and the sole survivor is maimed or "marked"; and the general moral about knowledge, power, and distrust. After telling me some details about Kwasimukámba, one Saramaka friend added the following comment (which I transcribe/translate here directly from tape):

And that's why, friend, Bush Negroes do not trust Greoles [non-Bush Negro Afro-Surinamers]. Which is why it is so hard for us to

get ahead [in the modern world]. We don't believe them. Because of what happened to our ancestors. If you take one of them as a *mdti*, that's what they'll do with you. You must not trust them with a single thing about the forest [our life]. City people! They fought against us along with whites. Like you. I must not [am not supposed to] tell you anything! It isn't good. Because whites used to come fight them. Well, Kwasimukamba was a Creole [*nênge*], and he joined up with the whites to bring them here ... But if you teach an outsider something, well, little by little he'll use it to come kill you. That's why, brother, Bush Negroes don't teach whites things ... All these Bush Negroes still believe that outsiders are always trying to learn our secrets so they can someday come kill us. Because if they'd really known Ajako's secret, they wouldn't have shot [wasted their ammunition on] the sugar-cane ... Well, they didn't trust him fully. They didn't teach him *all* of their knowledge. And that's why he didn't triumph in the end. That's why we say, if you teach a Creole or a white person, that's what they'll do with you. This is the one thing Bush Negroes really believe. It's stronger than anything else ... This is the great fear of all Bush Negroes. That those days shall come again.

IV

In what ways may the separate but parallel historical traditions about Kwasi be considered mutually enriching? Let us first summarize. Saramakas say that Kwasi (1) led several expeditions against them in the area of the plantations, (2) later led a peace-making expedition far upriver, (3) still later came to Saramaka on his own, where he lived for some time as a spy who feigned amity, (4) escaped back to the coast, where he (5) gathered an expedition against them, and (6) ultimately had his ear cut off in punishment by the Saramakas, in the wake of a great battle at the village of their chief, and (7) fled to the city. The documentary sources regarding Kwasi's activities vis-à-vis Saramakas report that he (1) indeed led expeditions against them in the area of the plantations, (2) indeed led a peace-making expedition far upriver (in 1747), (3) was taken to Saramaka, where he lived for about a year, feigning amity, (4) escaped back to the coast, where he (5) brought a giant expedition against them, and (6) himself became a central issue in the negotiations between the whites and Saramakas that came in the wake of a battle at the village of the Saramaka "Gouverneur" (chief), after which he (7) returned to the city.

The general outlines are certainly similar (confirming the striking "historicity" of Saramaka oral traditions more generally). Yet there are important contrasts in perspective or point of view. I shall mention two.

Kwasi depicted himself to the whites as having been abducted from the plantation, while Saramakas see him as having come of his own volition. We shall never know what Kwasi's precise motivation really was at the time he joined the Saramakas, as their temporary "friend". The Saramaka view does fit Kwasi's opportunistic character, as we know it from documentary sources; but as it is so "dramatically" satisfying, making the account more psychologically consistent, it may simply be a rhetorical device. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the contrastive accounts, taken together, define a richer field of psychological possibilities, and enhance our understanding of the dynamics of the situation, far better than either source would alone.

A second difference between the sources involves the outcome of the battle, in which each side claims victory. Commander Hentschel reported that the Saramakas *wanted* Kwasi very badly, but he did not indicate that their wishes were realized. In contrast, the Saramakas depict a *great* victory, capped by their revenge on Kwasi. Certainly, considerable credence must be given to a contemporary military report that is as detailed as that of Hentschel, when it comes to "what really happened" on the battlefield. On the other hand, it does not take a military historian to remind anyone who lived through the Vietnam war that "body counts" are social artifacts.¹⁵ In addition, Hentschel must have been well aware that the "other side" (the non-literate Saramaka enemy) were in no position to challenge his official report. Likewise, there is every reason to expect Saramakas, two hundred years later, to exaggerate their own "victory". In such a case, discovering "what really happened" is exceedingly difficult. Yet there is one remarkable piece of evidence, which I noticed only while writing these pages (though I had had it before my eyes many times before). And it suggests that there may be more to the Saramaka version of the battle than one might otherwise suspect. A close look at the famous Stedman-Blake engraving of "The celebrated Graman Quacy" (reproduced as Plate 2) reveals that, under his curly "grey Head of Hair" (Stedman 1790:762), this extraordinary nonagenarian is missing his right ear.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ The publication of this paper is the result of urging, on the part of Dutch colleagues who were present when I presented it (in somewhat different form) on 20 May, 1978, as an informal lecture to the Studiegroep voor Niet-westerse en Koloniale Geschiedenis, in Amsterdam, where it had the subtitle, "an 18th-century Suriname espionage mystery reconstructed from oral and written sources". As part of ongoing research, and prepared essentially for oral

presentation, it constitutes an abbreviated, interim report on an incident that will one day find itself buried amidst a number of other such incidents in a book which I have tentatively entitled *Those Times Shall Come Again: The Saramaka Vision of Their Formative Years*.

- ² My anthropological and historical research among the Saramakas was conducted in 1966, 1967-68, 1974, 1975 and 1976. A full list of resulting publications and an introduction to this people is found in Price 1976. Research for the present paper was supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant BNS 76-02848; it was drafted while I was the beneficiary of a Fellowship from The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study; and it was revised while I held a Fellowship from The American Council of Learned Societies. As always, Sally Price shared her special knowledge of the Saramakas to improve this presentation. I wish also to express special thanks to John Parker, Curator of the James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota, for permission to quote from the original 1790 manuscript of Stedman's *Narrative*. In cooperation with that library, I am currently preparing for publication a complete new edition based on Stedman's manuscript. This will differ on almost every page — often strikingly — from the 1796 first edition, which had been severely edited by the publisher, and with which Stedman himself expressed grave dissatisfaction.
- ³ I would reiterate that I was unaware, in the field, of the equivalence of the two "Kwasis", so that my Saramaka traditions are fully insulated from the colonial accounts. Saramakas themselves, though they know something of the famous slave "healer" Kwasi, do not relate him to Kwasimukamba.
- ⁴ Major sources include: Hartsinck 1770; Nassy 1788; Stedman 1790 and 1796; van Sijpesteijn 1858; Wolbers 1861; the satirical "rouwklagen" written upon the occasion of Kwasi's death, in 1787, and published in Lichtveld and Voorhoeve 1958; and numerous documents from the archives of the Sociëteit van Suriname, in the Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague (abbreviated hereafter as "SS"). All translations in the text are my own.
- ⁵ Kwasi's activities were already sufficiently independent and wide-ranging for his "fidelity" to be called into question repeatedly by Mauricius' many political enemies (see, for example, SS 201, 11-12-1749; and Wolbers 1861:436).
- ⁶ The two main documents regarding Kwasi's Saramaka adventure have been hitherto ignored in the standard histories of Suriname. They are "Informatie over de neger Quassie" (SS 294, "okt. 1754") and "Journaal gehouden op de tocht tegen de weglopers in Suriname, onder aanvoering van de kapitein Ernst Godfried Hentschel" (SS 297, 16-9/25-12-1755).
- ⁷ There was one other expedition, of similarly massive size (161 whites and 345 slaves), sent out in the early months of the following year. As far as I can tell from the documents at my disposal, however, the troops returned by May, "utterly defeated by the torrential rains", and with fully half of the slaves having died or deserted (SS 148, 1-5/31-5-1756). Kwasi seems to have been along as guide (SS 297, 27-3-1756), but I have seen no record of their having made contact with the Saramakas.
- ⁸ The tale, as presented here, is condensed from much longer oral versions. As I am interested here in content, not style, this procedure seems defensible. Folktales (*kóntu*) are told at wakes, and are clearly distinguished conceptually by Saramakas from what is considered to have "really happened". I have never seen any indication that Saramakas are aware of any structural parallels between this folktale and the story of Kwasimukamba.
- ⁹ Much of this information is esoteric, closely guarded, and known only to a relatively small number of historically-minded Saramakas. A careful exami-

nation of those oral traditions recorded by others from Saramakas (see Price 1976) and discussions with other anthropologists indicate that Kwasimukámba had never been discussed with an "outsider" before I began to hear fragments of his story in 1975. An analysis of the ways in which Saramakas use, transmit and manipulate knowledge of the past, and the ways I have learned something about it, forms the core of my book-in-progress: *Those Times Shall Come Again*.

- ¹⁰ For purposes of presentation, I have combined several oral fragments given to me at different times.
- ¹¹ Baákawáta, a tributary of the Pikilio, was the homeland of the Matjáú clan during the 1750's, and their accounts of Kwasimukámba's gambit (on which this paper draws heavily) quite naturally focus on that area. In fact, however, the great Matjáú leader Ajakó, who harbored Kwasimukámba, was living during this period with his sister, Jaja, apart from their Matjáú kinsmen, in the area to the west of the Upper Gaánlio. The incidents described in the text actually occurred there, not in Baákawáta, as I shall demonstrate in more detail in my forthcoming book.
- ¹² This song is in the esoteric *apüku* (forest spirit) language. "Lukéin" is the special term of address for Ajakó used by his sister's god; "banángoma" is the *apüku* word for "[black] person" (*nèngè* in Standard Saramaccan); "kibamba" is the *apüku* word for "white person" or "outsider" (*bakda* in Standard Saramaccan). The song, then, roughly translates: Ajakó, hurry man! (repeat) /Kwasimukámba is bringing the whites./ Hurry, man.
- ¹³ The man who is generally considered to be the most knowledgeable Matjáú historian alive, in discussing the incident, always stressed that it was an ear. Another version, however, recounts that it was his nose that was sliced off.
- ¹⁴ Tjedü, or "Kwedü", is now thought to be Kwasimukámba's father's name (or the name of his father's clan or tribe), which he — as a Saramaka still would — called-out when "recounting his name" (*kondd nèn*); see Price and Price 1972:343.
- ¹⁵ For example, a reporter in Vietnam recounts that, "a twenty-four-year-old Special Forces captain was telling me about it. 'I went out and killed one VG and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I'd killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?'" (Herr 1977:172).
- ¹⁸ Although Kwasi had leprosy many years before, its progress had long since been arrested. The published sources that comment directly on his disease and his famous self-cure make clear that his face was not in any way affected by leprosy (Stedman 1796, II: 347-48; Nassy 1788, II: 72-73; Lichtveld and Voorhoeve 1958:168-74). But there is evidence that, nonetheless, he characteristically "showed" only the "good side" of his face during his later years. In a satirical poem written on the occasion of his death, he is likened to the King of Diamonds (Lichtveld and Voorhoeve 1958:173). In a clever footnote Lichtveld and Voorhoeve — who knew nothing of the ear-cutting tradition — nevertheless speculate on the meaning of this metaphor, pointing out that the King of Diamonds is the only king in the deck who shows only half of his face.

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