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WORKING FOR THE MAN: A SARAMAKA OUTLOOK ON KOURO

One hundred and two years ago, when Saramakas deep in the interior of Suriname named a successor to their recently-deceased tribal chief, a delegation of elders had to set out by canoe down the Suriname River, to continue their journey in a small sailing ship by sea, until they reached Mana, French Guiana, where future tribal chief Akoósu had been working with some 100 other Saramaka men for nearly a decade (“Dosier [sic.] benoeming Akrosoe,” Landarchief, Paramaribo). In 1936, more than 60% of all Saramaka men, some 2000 individuals, were off in French Guiana working (Wong 1938: 323, Price 1975: 71). And in 1968, when we lived in the Saramaka village of Dángogó (the southernmost village on the Pikílió and the most distant from Paramaribo), approximately half of the men from that village were away in Kourou, helping to construct the Centre Spatial Guyanais.¹

Guyane française: Land of Contrasts and Contradictions. Not long ago, we had the occasion to visit some old friends in the so-called “Village Saramaka” at Kourou. Living in mean little shacks almost in the shadow of the Ariane rocket, these immigrant workers continue to supply much of the manual labor at the missile base. We accompanied a woman (who had been our neighbor twenty years earlier in Dángogó) on what she called “a little trip to her provision-ground”; entering the small supermarket nearby, barefoot and barebreasted, she selected her groceries – a frozen chicken from Brittany (with labels in French and Arabic), a tin of sardines from Nantes, some Parisian candies for the kids. The next day, back in Cayenne, we were invited by colleagues from ORSTOM to a posh restaurant where, under a set-piece “tropical” thatch roof, we drank fine wines from the metropole and ate delicious stews of monkey, armadillo, and tapir – all everyday foods of Saramakas back home in Suriname.

During the first century of labor migration, Saramaka men held a consistently favorable view of French Guiana as a place to earn money, and even to settle down. In contrast, when doing wage labor or conducting trading trips on the coast of Suriname, they always felt themselves imbedded in a rigid colonial system, and they were aware that other ethnic groups saw them as low men on the totem pole. While coastal Suriname continued to represent the very world from which Saramakas' First-Time ancestors had extricated themselves by force of arms, French Guiana was perceived as a looser system, as having a "homier" atmosphere and a more relaxed environment – and as a place where they could earn good money far more freely, in occupations that left them considerable independence. Arriving during the early days of the gold rush, Saramakas quickly monopolized major supply routes to the interior and became French Guiana's rivermen par excellence, taking their pay from Antillian prospectors in bags of gold dust and living high off the hog with what their descendants still remember as gorgeous Creole women who were always available, they say, for men with gold in their pockets. When river transport slowed with the waning of the gold rush, Saramakas switched to other forest endeavors – logging, rosewood extraction, and so forth – but they continued to earn their money in occupations that left them largely free to set their own schedules and pace of work. Saramaka men of the generation now past sixty like to say that while Suriname is their "*máma kôndè*" (their matrilineal [home] village), French Guiana is their "*táta kôndè*" (their "father's village," their sentimentally favored place to be).

Some Saramaka men never came home, founding large families with Creole women along the rivers they call Puwági (l'Approuague) and Wáyapóku (l'Oyapock) – as well as elsewhere – with many of their daughters, and daughter's daughters, marrying later Saramaka immigrants. But the very great majority of Saramakas in French Guiana returned to Suriname, often going back and forth at several-year intervals during their whole adult lives, until they came home to die. The relative welcome felt by Saramakas in French Guiana, as opposed to the coldness they have always sensed in coastal Suriname, was clearly expressed during the late 1970s, when the situation of Maroons in newly-independent Suriname was already beginning to deteriorate, by the aged Gaamá Agbagó (Abóikóni) in conversations with us: "If only I were a few years younger, I would simply pull up stakes and lead my whole [Saramaka] people across the Marowijne...."

Since the construction of the space center at Kourou, the kinds of jobs available to Saramakas in French Guiana have shifted away from the formerly predominant forest and river occupations. What we might call

“servile wage labor” has now become the norm; Saramakas, who are considered by their bosses to be unusually conscientious workers, sweep the offices and clean out the toilets of French engineers, and do other low-paid local construction and maintenance work. No matter how personally demeaning these jobs seem, the men who hold them consider themselves lucky. Given the political and economic situation in Suriname, such jobs (which would once have been scorned by Saramakas) have become the only game in town; they put food on the table and allow some savings for a hoped-for better tomorrow back home. Yet the men who labor at Kourou remain concerned about their compromised dignity. Engaged in servile labor, they keep their equilibrium by referring frequently to First-Time (anti-white, anti-Western) ideology, and by reminding themselves that they must never forget who they really are. As we have written elsewhere,

For all those respected Saramaka historians or ritual specialists, for all those renowned woodcarvers or dancers who are forced by economic necessity (and lack of Western schooling) to clean out toilet bowls in the French missile-launching base at Kourou, First-Time ideology cannot but help remain a powerful, relevant force.... Continuities of oppression, from original enslavement and torture to modern political paternalism and economic exploitation, have been more than sufficient to keep First-Time ideology a living force.

(Price 1983: 12)

But First-Time ideology is only half the story. A related aspect of this struggle to maintain identity involves Saramaka insistence on their own definition of present-day reality, their refusal to accept the whiteman's (or Creole's) definition of the labor situation. In Saramaka terms, a man can maintain his dignity even when doing degrading and servile labor *as long as he never accepts the Other's definition of the situation*. Indeed, for Saramakas, that is the only successful way – barring violence – to deal with the alienation of labor that their forefathers encountered on the slave plantations of Suriname and that they now face each day at the missile base in Kourou. Having for some years moved back and forth between servile wage labor in French Guiana and work in their own fields and forest back home, Saramaka men are acutely aware of the contrasts between controlling their own activities and selling their labor as a commodity. Emblematic of these concerns is a Saramaka folktale, in which plantation slavery and wage slavery are poetically merged, and the secret to survival in these contexts is clearly spelled out: Never let the whiteman impose his definition of the situation.²

Saramaka Migrant Laborers in Kourou, 1987.

Left, Kasólu, who told this folktale at a wake in Dángogó in 1968.

It used to be there was plenty of wage-labor work. You'd go off to look for work, and there would always be some job available. There was one guy and you'd just go ask him for work, a white man. He was the one in charge of it. Now when you went to ask him for work, You'd say, "Well, Brother, I've come to ask you for a job." Then he'd say to you, "Well, look. I've got some." He has a big tremendous rice field. He's got a cacao field. He's got all kinds of fields spread out all around. He's got pigs. He's got cows. He's got chickens. He's got ducks. So you just appear out of nowhere, and ask him for a job, and he says to you, "Well, Brother, I've got some cacao over there. You could go gather the pods and bring them back to me. I'll give you a bag." So off you'd go. But when you went to touch it, one of the cacao pods would break off, and all the beans would fall down and run all over the place. The plant would be absolutely stripped. So you walk back to the king. (That's the white man who has the jobs. He's just like a king.³) You'd talk to him and say, "Well, king. Here I am. I went and touched one of the cacao plants to harvest it, and all the beans fell on the ground." So you told him about how everything fell down to the ground. The man says, "Really? Well, my boy, when the cacao fell like that, did it hurt you?" He said, "Yes, my king, it hurt me." King says, "OK, bring your butt over here." He'd slice off a kilo of butt. One kilo of flesh that he just cut right off and took. When the time came, you'd just go off to your house and die.

Then the next person would come along asking for work. He'd say, "My king,

I've come to ask you for a job." He'd say, "Well, no problem. In the morning, just go let out those cows I've got over there, let them out of the pen and bring them outside." In the morning, the man went and opened the pen right up. The cows fell down, *gúhúhúhú*, fell down, all over the ground, dead. He went back and said, "My king, I went like you said and opened the cows' pen over there. All of them fell down on the ground, dead." He said, "My boy, did it hurt you?" He said, "Yes, my king." The king said, "Bring your butt over here. He turned his butt toward the king and went over. The king sliced off one kilo and took it. The guy went off and died.

So that's the way it went. He just kept killing people. But the name of the king – I forgot to mention that. The king was "King Nothing-hurts-him" (or "King Nothing-can-get-him-angry").

But there was a young guy who decided to go ask for work. His mother didn't want him to. She said, "Child, don't go. The place where you're going to go ask for work – Well, not a single person has gone to ask for work there and returned. If you go ask for work there, you're as good as dead and gone. Don't go." He said he was determined to go. He arrived. He said, "My king, I've come to ask you for a job." "All right," he said. He said, "My boy, do you know who I am?" The boy said, "No." He said, "I am King Nothing-hurts-him." He said, "OK, no problem." And he went off to the work he had. He went off to pick the cacao. As he reached up to touch it, all the beans fell down and ran *gúhúhúhú* all over the ground. He went back to the king. He said, "King, I went to touch the cacao over there to harvest it, and it fell off all over the ground, it all broke off and fell down before I even touched it." He said, "My boy, did it hurt?" The boy said, "No. My king, it didn't hurt me." King said, "OK. No problem. It's all right." He said, "Let's go to sleep for the night."

In the morning he said, "Well, my boy? I'd like you to go harvest a field of rice I've got over there. Just go on and cut the rice." He went off, reached out to cut a stalk of rice, and they all fell and covered the whole area, *gúhúhúhú*. He went back, and he said, "My king, I went to cut the rice over there and all the stalks fell over to the ground." He said, "My boy, didn't it hurt?" He said, "No. How could it have hurt me?" He said, "OK." So nothing happened. The next morning, he said, "I'd like you to let out some chickens I've got over there." He went to let them out. But as he opened the door, all the chickens fell down on the ground, dead. As things fell, he would take something and just kill them right off. It didn't bother him if things fell. This was a kid who wasn't hurt by anything. He'd just cut things down. He'd just cut it down and kill it. The king said, "Well, my boy. In the morning you'll go and open a duck pen I've got over there." He opened it. Whoosh!! Flap! They just kept on coming out and falling down. He finished every one of them off, just cut them up, dead! He went back and said, "My king, those ducks I went to let out, well, such-and-such a thing happened." He said, "Well, my boy, did it hurt you?" The boy said, "My king, it didn't hurt me." "Oh," he said. Well, this kept going on and on until there was nothing left in that place. I don't need to list all that was gone. There was absolutely nothing left. He'd killed everything. All that was left was some pigs he had.

So he said, "Well, my boy. Go open up the pig pen over there." So he went to let out the pigs. The pigs all fell down. So he jumped out and he clubbed them all to death. Cut them all up. Cut off their tails and took them. Then he buried those tails. He took the rest of the pigs' bodies and hid them off in the underbrush.

He just buried those tails till all that was left above ground was a teeny tiny bit, the tips were barely sticking up.

He just did it to make a problem with the king. He killed absolutely all of them. Then he came out and he ran to him. He went straight to his king. "My king, my king!" he said. "I went to go let out the pigs, and all of them burrowed down under the ground! So I ran back to tell you!" The king said [very agitated], "Where?" He said, "Over there!" The king said, "Let's go!" He ran off and when he arrived he looked around. Now, the way they were buried, the pigs' tails went deep into the ground, and only a little piece was sticking up. You couldn't grab it to pull it out. They grabbed them as tight as they could. The king said, "This won't work. You know what we'll do?" "What?" said the boy. "Run back to my wife, in the house over there. Go have her give you a shovel. Quick! Bring it back." The kid ran back there. He really ran fast to get there, and he said, "Quick! Hurry up, as fast as you can. My king says to!" "All right," she said. So then he told her – "My king says to tell you – Well, what he says is that I should 'live' with you." "What did you say?" she asked. "Yes," he said. "Quick! Quick! Quick! That's what he said!" She said, "No way!" The king turned and shouted back to her, "Quick! Give it to him quick! Give it to him quick! Give it to him right away!" She said, "OK, I understand." The king said "Give it to him! Give it to him! Give it to him! Fast! Fast!" That's what he said. "Give him! Give him! Give him! Give him! Give him!" The boy took the wife and threw her right down on the bed. And then he went to work. Well, that shovel that the king sent the boy back for, in a rush, so they could dig up the pigs – Well, the boy didn't bring it back so quickly. He was gone for quite a while, and finally the king said, "Something's wrong." He ran on back to the house, looked in, and the boy was on top of his lady. He fell over backwards and just lay there. The boy said, "My king, did this hurt you?" He said, "Yes, this hurt me." The boy said, "Bring your butt over here!" The king turned his butt toward the boy and approached him. He brought his butt over. The boy lopped off a kilo. And then the king died. That's why things are the way they are for us. Otherwise, it would have been that whenever you asked for work from a white man, a king, he'd kill you. The boy took care of all that for us. That's as far as my story goes.

Refusing to accept the whiteman's definition of the situation, the boy triumphed in the end. And today, however hard it is for Saramaka men to retain their inner strength and dignity while submitting to humiliating work in French Guiana, tales like this help them keep going.

It is interesting that none of the other versions of this folktale known to us from non-Maroon sources – from the Cape Verde Islands, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, coastal Suriname, and Haiti⁴ – contain the same, prototypically Maroon, central message. These others focus on explicit contests or wagers between a boy and a king (sometimes a boy and a devil) to see who can keep from getting angry the longest. In this comparative context, what is striking about the Saramaka version of the tale is that it describes an ongoing, long-term labor situation – indeed, alienated labor itself – and that, rather than a particular, explicit "contract"

about not getting angry, the story hinges on the hero figuring out (after many of his fellows have already been killed in the attempt) that the only way to triumph is to question the very nature of the system itself, not to accept the boss's definition of the labor situation, be it slavery or servile wage labor.⁵

Today, contrary to what one sometimes hears in the Guyanese press or at the neighborhood café, the eight or ten thousand Djukas and perhaps two or three thousand Saramakas who find themselves in French Guiana (the great majority as refugees from Suriname's civil war) are in no way looking for a free lunch. Like their warrior forefathers, their essential quest is for simple human dignity, for the right to work and live as free people. And in this bicentennial year of the French Revolution, perhaps we should keep in mind that Saramakas (as well as their Aluku, Djuka, Matawai, and Paramaka counterparts) were in this sense early fighters for *liberté* – and that their descendants are asking for little more today.⁶

Indeed, the current civil war in Suriname in an important sense represents the continued playing out of contrasts between slave (or Creole) and Maroon definitions of reality, between differing ideological stances toward Western authority. Saramaka folktales, like the spirit that inspires the Jungle Commandos who are fighting against Suriname's army, are infused with a firm sense of Afro-American differentness, a recognition that Maroons fought and died (and continue to do so) for a place on the fringe of the plantation (today the Western) world where they can maintain their dignity and moral independence. The Maroons fighting today do not seek political independence or separation from the national state, any more than their eighteenth-century ancestors wished to cut themselves off from the plantation society of the coast. In both cases, Maroons have been well aware of their dependence on the coastal society for all sorts of material goods, and have maintained intimate contacts through kinship and other ties with people in coastal Suriname and French Guiana. The contest today, as two hundred years ago, is ultimately about identity, about the viability of self-definitions that are not made-in-Europe or made-in-the-U.S.A.

Were the Maroon refugees in French Guiana given the opportunity to realize these aspirations, for example by grants of land in the unused interior (where they could engage in types of labor at which they are expert, and which do not involve automatic alienation, such as forest agriculture) the eventual rewards could be considerable. Drawing on their unique knowledge of the Amazonian ecosystem, Saramakas (as well as Djukas and Paramakas, not to mention Alukus) have made important contributions to the economy, and to the culture, of French Guiana for more than a century. Given the genuine human misery of the Maroons who have been uprooted from

their homes by the ongoing war, it might well be an appropriate moment to recognize these contributions and to seek ways to encourage the further participation and integration of these people (and, through adequate schooling, their children), into the life of an ethnically-diverse Guyane of the future.

NOTES

1. Portions of this paper draw on the introduction to Price & Price 1990; an earlier version was presented by R. Price at the conference, "Identité, Culture et Développement", in Cayenne, 1 July 1989.
2. Saramaka folktales are told as part of funeral rites. Dynamic and filled with performative nuance, they are supremely interactive, with the teller engaging the listeners in an ongoing give-and-take as the tale unfolds. The tale included here in summary form was told in 1968 by Kasólu, a man then in his late twenties, to an enthusiastically participating group of the deceased woman's relatives, friends, and neighbors. Price & Price 1990 presents English translations of two evenings of Saramaka tale-telling, recorded during wakes in 1968, and includes the complete version of Kasólu's tale.
3. Afro-American folktales frequently allude, implicitly or explicitly, to equivalences between kings, slave masters, white men, and devils – each of whom controls labor, and money. (In this context, it is worth noting that in Saramaka folktales, the speech of devils is consistently rendered in Sranan, the language of coastal Suriname.) For a discussion of related themes in the French Antilles, see Giraud & Jamard 1985.
4. See, for other versions, Andrade 1930: 48-49; Herskovits & Herskovits 1936: 368-75; Mason & Espinosa 1922: 44-47; Parsons 1923: 112-16; Parsons 1933-43, Pt II: 572.
5. Note that as part of the redefinition of the labor situation in the Saramaka tale, the hero shifts – over the course of his relationship with the king/boss – from the role of passive victim (having plants break as soon as he reaches out to harvest their fruit) to that of an active aggressor (bludgeoning the king's animals to death).
6. As a recent French newspaper article pointed out, almost with incredulity, under the headline, "Des condamnés au 'non-droit'":

For more than two years in a French *département*, la Guyana, many thousands of Surinamers have been 'parked' in camps under the control of the French army, without rights of residence, the right to work, the right to attend school, guarantees not to be sent back to the land they fled because of persecution, the right of free speech, and so forth.... These Maroons have been placed outside the law ... without the official status of refugees to which both normal French law and international law entitle them. *Libération*, 9 May 1989, p. 25).

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