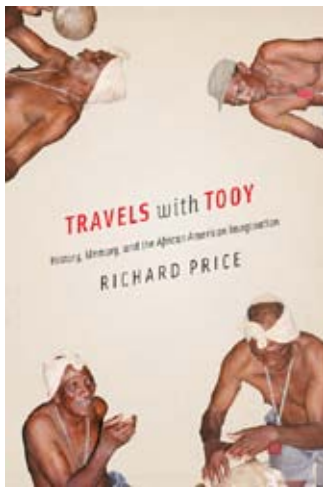




December 2009 Newsletter

“Sex, Magic and Murder” – A Selection from *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination*

By Richard Price



Editor’s Note: Richard Price’s *Travels with Tooy* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) received the 2009 Clifford Geertz Prize in the Anthropology of Religion, awarded by the Society for the Anthropology of Religion (SAR) at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The SAR dedicates the Geertz Prize to “encourage excellence in the anthropology of religion by recognizing an outstanding recent book in the field.” Price’s work also received the 2009 Gordon K. and Sybil Lewis Memorial Award for Caribbean Scholarship, for the best book, in any language and in any discipline, about the Caribbean. In addition, *Travels with Tooy* was awarded the Victor Turner Prize in Ethnographic Writing in 2008. The Society for Humanistic Anthropology bestows that award in honor of the late Victor Turner, who devoted his career to seeking a language that would reopen anthropology to the human subject, and the prize is given in recognition of an innovative book that furthers this project.

The University of Chicago Press provides a brief overview of these *Travels* – “Included on the itinerary for this hallucinatory expedition: forays into the eighteenth century to talk with slaves newly arrived from Africa; leaps into the midst of battles against colonial armies; close encounters with double agents and femme fatale forest spirits; and trips underwater to speak to the comely sea gods who control the world’s money supply. This enchanting book draws on Price’s long-term ethnographic and archival research, but above all on Tooy’s teachings, songs, stories, and secret languages to explore how Africans in the Americas have created marvelous new worlds of the imagination.”

Rich Price and the Press have granted permission for publication in this *Newsletter* issue of an excerpt from *Travels with Tooy*. The following selection presents Rich's chapter entitled "Sex, Magic, and Murder" (pp. 94-99). In contributing this chapter excerpt for the *Newsletter*, the author observes:

As the opening words of the book say, "Clifford Geertz has called anthropologists 'merchants of astonishment.' But for me, it's Tooy who plays that role. Some thirty-five years into my research with Saramakas I met him, and it wasn't long before he took me through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole. He has shared with me hidden worlds that, for him, make life worth living and, for me, continue to amaze and fascinate." I hope this chapter may serve to give a taste of the whole.

SEX, MAGIC, AND MURDER

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Happier times. We were squeezed around Tooy's dining room table—Tooy, his older brother Sensiló, Sally, and me—the TV with its rabbit ears on the cluttered sideboard soundlessly miming a French game show. On the oil-cloth, Sally had laid out separate bowls of rice and stewed chicken and okra sauce, with a large plastic pitcher of water. Tooy heaped up his plate as usual, announcing that, as a matter of principle, he never took seconds. He loaded another plate for Sensiló, who had been blind for the past five years but had once been among the strongest and most successful Saramaka canoe men in French Guiana. It was my first meal with Sensiló, who was making a rare visit from Paramaribo—illegally, since he doesn't have French papers. There was no way he would miss his favorite brother's enstoolment as captain of the Saramakas of Cayenne.

As we began to eat, Tooy asked me (showing me off to his brother, as it were) to tell them what I knew about "the sinking at Gaándan Falls," a First-Time story I'd often discussed with him—how the whites sent an emissary during the eighteenth-century wars, how the Saramakas tricked him and stole the goods sent as tokens of peace, and how they sent him and his companions to their deaths as their canoe plunged over the great falls. I obliged, enjoying the occasion, while we wolfed down our food—Saramaka men eat rapidly, as if someone were about to take away their plate. At a certain point in the story I mentioned Kwasímukámba.

With a muffled roar, Sensiló threw up his arms, jumping up from the table, upsetting his plate of food, overturning the water pitcher, and stumbling cane-less through the open doorway. Tooy followed him quickly. I sat stunned.

It would take me two years to learn why I'd caused Sensiló such distress. The next morning, he greeted me as if nothing had happened, and we continued to enjoy each other's company during his occasional visits to Cayenne. Tooy would tell me, when I pressed, only that Sensiló "couldn't hear" that name.



Sensiló.

I was proud of the knowledge I had about Kwasímukámba, the double agent whom Saramakas finally bested in the mid-eighteenth century.¹ For historically minded men, he remains the prototypical symbol of betrayal and his highly secret story a constant reminder of the necessity to be guarded in all relations with outsiders. He stands as a dark warning star at the heart of the Saramaka moral universe. I knew literally hundreds of details about his complex life. But I was clueless as to his special meaning to Sensiló.

* * *

Cut to the high-security prison wing of the hospital in Martinique. Two years have passed. Tooy's open-heart surgery is scheduled for two days hence. The gendarmes are rougher than usual when they pat me down for my half-hour visit—the pen and folded-up sheet of paper in my pocket don't sneak by today, though the apple I bring as a gift is permitted. Keys turn and the steel door clanks open. Tooy is sitting on his bed looking alone and frightened, in an isolation cell thousands of miles from home, treated like the dangerous criminal he isn't and about to undergo the dreaded knife. I take the only chair and try some comforting small talk.

The day before, I'd snuck in a photo of an impressive all-white, stylish, vintage yacht (named *Talatha G*) that had anchored in the cove below our

house. Now, he tells me he's dreamed a new song, thinking about that Wénti ship and his own predicament. In deep voice, softly, he sings, *Ma Dígbeónsu, Heépi wi-o! / Ma Dígbeónsu, Heépi wi-o! / U dê téé na alónugbe / Tjá u gó a niviélo*. He explains, "This is a Wénti song—we're out here in the world, but we don't know where we are, we don't know where we'll land. In Wénti language, *Alónugbe* means 'sun,' *niviélo* means 'sea.'" (Thus: "Mother Dígbeónsu, help us! We've come as far as the sun, bring us back to the sea.") He looks at the photo, which he's stored under his mattress, and says admiringly, "That ship could really carry you right to the bottom of the sea, all the way to Wénti country!"

Tooy clears his throat and announces he wants to offer me something, though it's something he can give me only in very small doses. "Gweyúnga," he begins, "had a wife named Hwéte—one of Alabi's wife's people." I could tell I was about to receive a rare gift. "Something was coming out of the forest and stealing chickens, dogs, and, one time, even a child from Gweyúnga's village. Who," Tooy asks rhetorically, "was doing it?" He leans toward me and whispers conspiratorially, "Kwasímukámba!" And then he throws up his hands to indicate that the dose is finished.

Now, I knew that Kwasímukámba had posed as a new runaway when he joined the Saramakas in 1754 and that he'd lived for some months with their chief, Ayakô, before escaping back to the city to lead a massive colonial army against them. What I'd never considered was who he'd first encountered when he showed up in Saramaka territory, who—in Saramaka parlance—had "caught" him. Or that he might have had a history in Saramaka before he arrived at the chief's village. This was what Tooy had now started to reveal—a highly charged story that places Kwasímukámba near the center of his own history and plumb center in that of Sensiló.

* * *

Over the course of many months, in dribs and drabs, during my hospital visits and my prison visits and finally as a free man once again, Tooy very slowly filled me in.

Kwasímukámba, the wily faithful slave, enacted a daring plan to "escape" from slavery, pose as a runaway, and spy on the Saramakas. From his forest camp at the head of Wet Eye Creek, he would raid Gweyúnga's village in the dead of night to steal a chicken, or it might be a dog or even a child, to sacrifice to his *óbia*.

Gweyúnga decided to act—who could be ruining his village? He went into the forest to set a trap. First, he built himself a shelter on a hillock

and then, with his Tonê pot, brought down the rains. Just before dawn, Gweyúnga heard the forest begin to tremble: Kwasímukámba appeared at his doorstep seeking shelter. Gweyúnga just sat there, puffing away on his Tonê pipe, softly singing Tonê songs. Kwasímukámba stood transfixed. And then suddenly he collapsed with a thud. Gweyúnga had “smoked” him—his *óbia* had put him to sleep!

When Kwasímukámba awoke, Gweyúnga invited him back to his village—but he had miscalculated Kwasímukámba’s powers, for by the time they arrived, Gweyúnga’s strength was already ebbing. “Kwasímukámba,” Tooy concludes, “was simply riper than he was.” And Gweyúnga was to pay the consequences.

It began with sex. Gweyúnga had two wives: Béti-Kadósu, who’d come with him from Africa and given birth to their son Antamá, and the much younger Hwéte. By this time in his life, Gweyúnga was, as Tooy puts it, having trouble getting his cock to crow. (It’s not just that he was well into his sixties—Kwasímukámba had also been working him over with *óbia*, Tooy explained.) So, whenever Gweyúnga went to spend the night with one wife, Kwasímukámba would pay a visit to the other.

What happens next is recounted in rival versions, though both pin full blame on Kwasímukámba. Tooy is persuaded of the truth of his own account, because he heard it right from the mouth of Sensiló’s *óbia* (who, as we shall soon see, has special reason to know)—Hwéte informs Kwasímukámba that she is pregnant with his child, and he decides to make an *óbia* to kill Gweyúnga before he finds out. He sends Gweyúnga off to set fish traps, empties out his Tonê pipe, lines the bowl with iguana skin (the strongest taboo of Tonê), and loads the tobacco back in. When Gweyúnga returns and smokes his pipe, his belly roars, and it is only hours before Death kills him. The other version, which I heard in the 1970s from Mètisên, a man brought up in Tooy’s natal village, depicts Hwéte as Gweyúnga’s new wife who begs Kwasímukámba to make her a love potion to bind her husband more strongly to her, but the jealous Kwasímukámba, instead, prepares a death potion, which she then innocently feeds her husband. In Mètisên’s words,

Hwéte peeled some very ripe plantains and cooked them until they were just right. Then she mashed them with peanuts, and while she was mashing threw the *óbia* in with them. Then she added palm oil. If you saw it, you just knew it would be sweet! . . . As soon as Gweyúnga had taken the first bite, his belly roared *huun!* And it began to hurt him terribly. People made medicines and performed rites till they were weary. All night long! And then, around five in the morning, he breathed his last.²

There's no disagreement about what happened in the aftermath of the great man's death. Rumors were flying. Palavers were held. And when they raised Gweyúnga's corpse in divination, it made it clear that his wife, Hwéte, had killed him.

Hwéte knew nothing of the verdict and remained in mourning confinement. Meanwhile, the villagers decided to build a coffin big enough for two, Gweyúnga on top, Hwéte on bottom. Tooy told me it took them two full days to cut enough planks for that coffin.

Some people hoped that Antamá would avenge his father's murder by finishing off Hwéte. But Antamá never accepted the verdict—how could Hwéte have done such a thing? (Tooy told me that according to his brother's god, Flibánti, who was an eyewitness to these events, Antamá used his powers of flight to go up and visit his mother's brother Wíi in Lángu, to make sure it was all right to bring the woman upriver. Wíi told him to go ahead.)

Antamá snuck in at midnight to see her, told her what was going on, and loaded her and his half-sister Afaata—Gweyúnga's daughter with Hwéte—into his canoe for the upstream journey to his village far up the Gaánlío. By the time Gweyúnga's village had discovered Hwéte's absence and determined that she hadn't simply gone off into the forest to kill herself, it was too late. There was nothing left to do but bury their dead leader.

Hwéte, heavy with Kwasímukámba's boy-child, and her daughter Afaata arrived the next day in Antamá's village—where Tooy today looks back on them with affection as the founders of his matrilineage.³



Some months after these events, Kwasímukámba stayed for a time in Antamá's village, where the two became very close. The wars with the whites were still raging, and Kwasímukámba shared much of his ritual knowledge with his new friend. And as Antamá prepared to go off to battle near the coast, Kwasímukámba taught him one of his trademark powers—the *óbia* that permits men to fly.⁴

When there had been no word of Antamá for many weeks, his people charged Kwasímukámba with witchcraft. At which point he used his *óbia* to summon Antamá, who alit in the center of the village in the form of a vulture. As Tooy tells it, Kwasímukámba addressed the bird, saying, "Antamá, I taught you to fly, but your people doubted me. So I'm taking the flying *óbia* away from you and giving it to my son, Gisi" (the fruit of Hwéte's pregnancy). That's when Kwasímukámba himself flew off to the coast, soon

to lead a great army against the Saramakas. "And it's why," says Tooy plaintively, "my people no longer have flying *obia*."

* * *

What, then, is the special connection with Tooy's brother Sensiló? The short answer is that the most powerful ritual possession of Antamá—who became the greatest Saramaka *obia*-man of the second half of the eighteenth century—was the *obia* called Flibánti, which he learned from Kwasímukámba. Tooy tells me that during the epic battle with the army brought by Kwasímukámba, Antamá ritually "boiled" him and managed to shoot him, after which Kwasímukámba turned himself into an armadillo. "If you ever tell this story to anyone, close the door first!" he says. "It's very secret! That's why they call that place Armadillo Creek [Kámbakiíki]. The animal's hole is still there." And then he adds, "Sensiló can't go anywhere near that place!"

Tooy tells me that, after Antamá's death, his *obia* passed to his sister Afaata. And he can trace its further descent with precision, from one person to another—until it finally possessed Sensiló.

If Kwasímukámba is a dangerous figure for all Saramakas, he is the gravest of dangers for Sensiló. Kwasímukámba betrayed and murdered Antamá's father. Later he befriended and betrayed Antamá himself. But in the end, with the help of his ritual powers, Antamá turned the tables on Kwasímukámba, "boiling" and shooting the traitor.

The *obia* I have chatted with during Sensiló's visits to Cayenne, who once assured me he was "here before Noah," is then none other than Flibánti, Kwasímukámba's personal *obia*, which he taught to Antamá. Eyewitness to Kwasímukámba's exploits as well as the power behind his ultimate defeat, this *obia* is intimately linked to the lives of both the great spy and his friend and later nemesis Antamá.

Indeed, when Sensiló, who had been a proud and powerful man, lost his sight five years ago, it surprised no one that divination found it was Kwasímukámba taking his revenge.

No wonder Sensiló startled at the very sound of his name.

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