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Ethnographic Devotion and the Long View

Last summer I found myself for the umpteenth time in "Equatoria," that South American wonderland, French Guiana—once again following, however circuitously, in the footsteps of Rich and Sally Price. It was late night in the coastal town of Mana, once touted in promotional materials as "one [of] the world's most multicultural communities… a town where 1500 people speak 13 different languages and live together in remarkable harmony." I was taking a break from a local cultural festival at which I was an invited speaker and had joined a small group of carousers outside a ramshackle bar on the edge of town. As the Parbo beer flowed, and people conversed in combinations of Okanisi, Pamaka, Sranan, Guyanais Creole, French, Dutch, and other languages, I became aware that this was a Saamaka-owned establishment.

I almost could have predicted what came next. Overhearing some of the conversation at my table, the owner of the bar came over to challenge me. "How did you learn to speak Ndyuka like that?" he asked me in Saamaka-flavored Ndyuka. "For a moment I thought you were that Saamaka *bakaa*, the Saamaka white man who speaks all the *Businengee* languages and knows everything there is to know about Saamaka." "No, no, no, that was my teacher," I said, "many years ago in America." He eyed me suspicously: "you're lying! You can't tell *me* anything about him. I have his book, written in Saamaka language! Tell me his name—him *and* his wife!" Without missing a beat, I shot back triumphantly: "Lisáti, anga Sáli!"—Richard and Sally. Those magic words earned me a firm handshake and another bottle of Parbo, on the house. It was a version of an exchange I've had many times over the last forty or so years.

During the 1980s, while Rich was my academic advisor in the anthropology department at Johns Hopkins, I embarked on roughly three years of fieldwork with the Aluku or Boni Maroons. Since then, I have returned to French Guiana and Suriname multiple times to undertake further research, making me the only former student who shares with the Prices a decades-long professional involvement with this particular cultural zone. Today I want to offer a few brief reflections on the Prices' unusually deep commitment—their ethnographic devotion, as I call it—to the Saamaka and other Guianese Maroon peoples , using intersections with my own work and experiences as an ethnographer to explore in a very preliminary way some of the challenges posed by what I consider the "ethnographic devotion" that we share.

Despite their ethnographic immersion in other cultures, from Spain and Mexico to Martinique, Saamaka occupies center stage. In the jointly-authored *Saamaka Dreaming*—one of my personal favorites—they reveal that, of the various languages they speak, Saamaka is second only to their mother tongue in conversations with each other. Not just this, but it's a language in which they frequently dream.

Beyond the personal mark it left on their psyches, it is apparent that the Prices' full-on immersion in Saamaka life at a pivotal point in their careers helped to shape their intellectual development in profound ways. The rethinking of Herskovitsian paradigms that led to a whole new round of theoretical debates about the nature of Afro-American culture; the early challenge to entrenched academic ideas limiting genuine historical consciousness to the West or to literate societies; the critiques of hegemonic museum worlds and the colonial, ethnocentric, or otherwise problematic categories and assumptions they continue to reproduce—these, and other influential

aspects of their thinking, seem to me, at least in part, to have grown almost organically from their sustained close encounters with on-the-ground Saamaka realities.

The Prices' insistence on keeping their feet firmly planted in ethnographic terra firma, even as they imaginitively and creatively grapple with larger questions and concerns, and experiment with new ways of conveying these in writing, has always struck me as something that bodes well for the longevity of their work. Academic trends may come and go, but carefully situated observations and dialoguing with interlocutors about life on the ground will remain the bedrock to which future generations of anthropologists will have to return as they interpret, problematize, construct, and reconstruct knowledge of what once was, and what it can tell us about what now is. Among the most admirable facets of the Prices' approach, in my view, is their abiding awareness that those about whom they write must be counted as an important part of their audience, both now and in future—that it is not only inevitable, but desirable, for those on the other side of their ethnographic encounters, as well as their descendants, to participate substantially, if not equally, in the construction of future anthropological knowledge. This seems to me to go hand in hand with what I refer to as "ethnographic devotion."

However, as I suggested a moment ago, such devotion is not without its challenges. The psychological complexities of negotiating boundaries between "self" and "other," "inside" and "outside," in committed, long-term ethnography have long been recognized. What does it really mean for one who, in most cases, is at best a social anomaly—a temporarily resident anthropologist—to come to identify with those being studied as "his" or "her" people? As a fellow traveler of Rich and Sally's in Guianese Maroon worlds—at times literally—I have shared with them some uncomfortable moments when coming up against such thorny questions. In *Equatoria*, their ironic and often pained account of the museum collecting "expedition" we jointly and somewhat reluctantly undertook in the Aluku territory, they touched on the "moments when differences between Saramaka and Aluku ways risk being drawn incongruously into matters of personal pride, into questions of respective expertises. Among the three of us," they point out, "the Aluku are 'Ken's people'; Ken is 'Rich's student'; and Sally's the one who's been writing on the ethics of ethnographic collecting. All three of us know that, in the larger scheme of things, none of this really matters." True enough. Yet, there are times when such troubling moments give us pause for thought.

The journal I kept on my own during the beginning of our journey presents an interesting, and perhaps less filtered, counterpoint to the Prices' reflections on these disquieting moments. I wrote, for example: "As we pulled into Maripasoula [a settlement in the Aluku territory that originated as a French administrative post], Rich and Sally were amazed at the *bakaa*-ness [the "Westernness"] of the place. Right before we landed, Rich turned to me and said, 'the Aluku don't deserve a museum. They let this happen to them.' I replied, 'neither do the Saramaka. They've let themselves be conquered.' To which Rich simply responded, 'not yet.'" In impulsively speaking of the Saamaka in these terms, I didn't really mean it, of course; I was merely repeating a characterization I had frequently heard among Aluku elders. But what an odd, indeed absurd, position to find ourselves in!—two *bakaa* anthropologists (Sally was not part of this particular exchange) seeming to project Maroon interethnic frictions in our own little drama. Such defensive-sounding taking sides on behalf of "one's people"—as incongruous and inappropriate as it was, particularly given the realities of ethnographic fieldwork in Maroon societies such as Saamaka and Aluku, where boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders,"

especially perpetually prying anthropologists were assiduously maintained—is perhaps pardonable. We ethnographers, after all, are only human.

I knew, in fact, that Rich's and Sally's Saamaka-tinted observations on the sorry state of Aluku society, which continued to irk me as the trip proceeded, had more than a little validity. After all, I had just finished a dissertation largely about the malaise—the frequently self-reported disorientation and at times, it seemed, desperation—afflicting the Aluku people as a result of the recent, very rapid incorporation of their territory into the French state and the massive damage to the traditional Aluku way of life this had caused.

Over the next few years, the Prices and I remained occasional fellow travelers, whether metaphorically or literally, in Guianese Maroon worlds, or extensions of them, that increasingly included Aluku, Saamaka, and other Maroon travelers moving beyond the confines of their own traditional territories and societies. Fast forward to the near-present, and the maintenance of a principled stance of "ethnographic devotion" in rapidly changing times appears to be more complicated than ever. The Prices have continued to lead the way in confronting these complexities. And, once again, Aluku actors have been prominently implicated. The example I choose to illustrate this comes from a piece of Sally's in which she ponders what she calls "an anthropologist's dilemma." The dilemma in question arises when younger practitioners and representatives of a cultural tradition that one has spent much of one's career ethnographically documenting and championing begin to project understandings of this tradition that clash with those gleaned by the ethnographer herself, based on years of painstaking work with older practitioners, along with careful archival research.

The issue revolves around increasingly common narratives about *tembe* (traditional Maroon arts such as woodcarving and painting)—narratives which, when submitted to rigorous scrutiny, can be shown to have been introduced largely by "outsiders" rather than Maroon ancestral practitioners of these arts. The dubious depiction of *tembe* to which Sally is responding in this case holds that traditional designs are intended to be read as symbols that can be strung together to communicate complex messages and stories. In fact, all the evidence from earlier times suggests that this idea is foreign to older Maroon conceptions. Nonetheless, it is a notion that non-Maroon collectors and buyers, privileging their own imaginations and visions of "primitive art," have long insisted on when dealing with Maroon artists.

As part of an ongoing reinvention of tradition in this context, this alleged system or "language" of complex symbols has now been projected back into the distant past, cast as a tool strategically used by the Maroons' ancestors centuries ago in planning their escape from slavery and devising ways of surviving and rebuilding cultures in the forest. Favored by expanding art markets and recent ideological trends celebrating Maroon resistance, these ideas are now becoming part of widely-shared understandings among younger Maroon practitioners themselves, some of whom now use canvas or murals as a primary medium and exhibit their paintings in prestigious settings in Europe and beyond.

As it happens, younger Aluku artists—often working through cultural organizations based in coastal French Guiana—have been among the most active and vocal participants in this reading of Maroon art, although artists from other groups, including Saamakas, have also been involved. Two of the prominent Aluku artists, Antoine Dinguiou and Jean-Luc Maïs, spent portions of their childhoods in Komontibo, the traditional upriver Aluku village where I lived for more than a year in the mid-1980s. During this time, I got to know both individuals quite well.

Sally singles out Jean-Luc Maïs for the ambitiousness of his claims about the origin and nature of the Maroon arts known as *tembe*. To illustrate her point, she paraphrases a passage from a publication he authored in French for younger readers, as follows: "Africans fresh off the boats from Africa… invented a writing system for communication on the plantations that they then used to record the story of each slave's escape. This writing system also allowed them to record the genealogy of each family as well as information on 'customs, traditions, culture, and other kinds of information that was indispensable for the transmission of their history and identity.'" These claims, in fact, fly in the face of everything Rich and Sally learned about the history and cultural significance of Maroon *tembe*. And I myself never came across such assertions about the origins and historical meaning of *tembe*.

What makes this particular example so personally poignant for me is that the artist she singles out, Jean-Luc Maïs, was not just any neighbor during the time I lived in Aluku. He lived in the house right next to mine, and was part of the extended family that hosted me—or perhaps I should say, tolerated my presence—during my stay. He and his mother, grandmother, great uncle, brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, and aunts introduced me to life in Aluku. When I first arrived in Komontibo in early 1984, Jean-Luc was six years old. I remember him as a bright and vivacious kid, with a slightly mischievous side. He was generally known then as Saliki—an Aluku pronunciation of "Jean-Luc." Like other children his age, Saliki hadn't yet started school and spoke no French. He appears often in my field notes, sometimes in passages that remind me of the Prices' descriptions of young children playing in Saamaka in the 1960s.

After leaving upriver Aluku for a stint on the coast in 1986, I wasn't to see Saliki again until I returned in 1995 for another round of short-term fieldwork in the interior. I recorded the reunion in my field journal: "On the way back to my hotel [in Maripasoula] I was hailed by Saliki—now 'Jean Luc'—who came running down the road after me. He knew me right away, but I hardly recognized him! He's now 16, almost full grown, and his voice has changed (though not yet fully that of a man)…. [Later], around 7:30 PM, there was a knock on my door. It was Saliki. Once again he wanted to speak French, but I got the conversation back to Aluku. [He] said he'd gone to school for a while in Kourou…. he studied English while in school and can now read a fair amount of it, but the pronunciation still gives him problems. [He] says he has learned how to play drums—both aleke and the older styles, including songe.

Almost another decade went by before I heard from Saliki again, this time via Rich Price. Saliki now resided in Kourou, where he had encountered the Prices. Rich had kindly offered to forward a gift he had wanted to send me—the first published dictionary of the Aluku language, authored by Saliki. As a part-time lexicographer working on my own dictionary of Aluku, I was pleasntly surprised to find that Saliki had beaten me to the punch. His gift included an inscription, written in the Aluku language, but rendered in part-French orthography. "For Papa Ken," it read. "We will never forget a *paandasi pikin* [something like "son of the soil," as well as "fellow villager"]. Don't forget us. We love you. Jean-Luc Maïs."

A few years ago, after having read Sally's piece on "an anthropologist's dilemma," I did a web search and found Jean-Luc on Facebook. He was now living in metropolitan France, and it was clear from some of his photos that he was active as an artist. One photo showed him working on a mural, over a caption in French that sounds very close to the reimagining of Maroon *tembe* that so struck Sally. Translated to English, it said, roughly: "Art will exist as long as man lives. A kind of writing in the form of symbols that we have inherited from our ancestors. The colors trace the journey of these men who suffered. And the symbols recount and

immortalize their stories. This writing belongs not only to the people of the Maroni River, but to all those who experienced slavery."

Although I long ago swore off Facebook, I am hoping eventually to be back in touch with Jean-Luc, who recently moved back to French Guiana. The question is, how will we approach possibly irreconcilable differences of understanding when discussing aspects of Aluku culture that are of importance to each of us?

While there are no ready-made solutions to such conundrums, the conclusion that Sally arrives at in "An Anthropologist's Dilemma" seems to me entirely sensible: "Insisting on our understandings of the history and culture of the society we study (no matter how irrefutably established through work with native interlocutors supplemented with research in museums and archives) when a new generation of that society is adopting a different storyline as part of its accommodation to forces operating in the twenty-first century world requires a recognition that we are no longer necessarily 'advocates of indigenous cultures, defenders of our people.' This means acknowledging that the story we tell is one of several legitimate narratives, clearly useful for some purposes but not others. And it means adopting a good dose of humility in terms of the intellectual positions we decide, in the end, to adopt."

It is hardly surprising that Richand Sally's long dreamt-of return to upriver Saamaka last summer, after an absence of 45 years, turned out to be far from idyllic. Their report, "Rip van Winkle in the Rainforest," sketches a harrowing picture of Saamaka as a society in many ways under siege, by turns struggling against, and collaborating with, both global and local political and economic forces largely beyond their control. "During our visit," they write, "we often asked ourselves whether the unmitigated pride that Saamakas once had in First-Time values, in their own way of life, was slipping away. We wondered whether a bleak new day had in fact dawned and whether the ideological principles that had stood at the foundation of Saamaka life for three centuries were finally being leached of their meaning" In a sense, the Saamaka might be seen as following in the footsteps of the Okanisi (or Ndyuka), who might, in turn, be seen as following in the footsteps of the Aluku—who were the first to experience such massive, overpowering dislocations at a society-wide level. Rich and Sally have advocated tirelessly on behalf of *all* of them. In my own small way, I have tried to follow in their footsteps in this as well. As the fabric of the Saamaka society they once knew continues to unravel, the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations promises to become yet more tenuous.

The dilemma that we anthropologists are increasingly likely to face, as purveyors of hard-won knowledge that risks being rejected by younger individuals whose own elders entrusted us with this very knowledge, of course pales in comparison with the enormous challenges facing many of the societies we have been privileged to study. But it will have to be confronted nonetheless, at times in conjunction with these larger challenges. I cannot end without pointing out that, through acts of ethnographic devotion of which many of their readers might not be aware, the Prices have already laid some of the groundwork for productive cross-generational negotiations of this kind. Important examples are the published Saamaka-language translations they produced of two of their ethnographically richest books, Rich's *First-Time*, and their jointly authored *Two Evenings in Saramaka*. Clearly a labor of love, these translations represent but a slice of the invaluable body of work, including a trove of objects and unpublished archival materials that they have left, along with their published oeuvre, for future generations of Saamakas themselves, as well as others, to pore over.

With regard to the dilemma I have focused on here, there is reason to believe, or at least hope, that future generations of Saamaka and other Maroon scholars, like principled scholars elsewhere, will go on interrogating, critiquing, and revising what came before, including the revisionist interventions of some of their Maroon predecessors. Future Maroon scholars will have to rely, as we all do, on the quality of the sources available to them. It will be their good fortune to have had an extraordinarily devoted, talented, meticulous, and forward-thinking pair of ethnographers—Lisati ku Sali—gathering knowledge on their behalf in a place and time that future generations might otherwise only have been able to dream of.

[Ethnography as historical record to be constantly revisited?-KL]