

SAAMAKA GAYS IN QUILOMBOS?

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Abstract: This brief article raises the possibility that, over the course of the twentieth century, a small number of Saamaka homosexual men may have sought and found a comfortable living environment in Brazilian quilombos. It describes a concrete case from the mid-twentieth century, with the help of information from José Luis Ruíz-Peinado Alonso, a Catalan anthropologist who worked with *remanescentes de quilombos* in the Brazilian Amazon. Definitive proof of this phenomenon remains lacking but the data are suggestive. It would seem that Brazilian quilombos may have served as a preferred refuge for Saamaka men who did not fit into their homophobic surroundings along the rivers of Suriname.

Keywords: Saamaka (Saramaka) – Suriname – Maroons – Quilombos – Homosexuality – Homophobic

Over the years, I've had my share of discussions, in Saamaka, the Netherlands, and the USA, about whether there was such a thing as a Saamaka “gay” man.¹ Were there Saamaka (Maroon) men who loved and had sex with other men (as well, perhaps, with women)? Were there Saamaka men who behaved like what the Creoles of Guyane call a “*makoumê*”? (In the Saamaka language, the only word for male homosexual is, in fact, *makume*.) Saamakas adamantly deny it to a man. They say they know what such people are like, because they've often seen them – at least the men have – in Guyane, where they are common, just as they have seen female lovers in Paramaribo, where Sapphic love has an old and recognized public space.² But in Saamaka, they say: No! Never!³

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¹ In 2010, the Saamaka People officially changed their name from Saramaka to Saamaka. (There is no “r” sound in the Saamaka language.)

² See for example, HERSKOVITS, Melville J.; HERSKOVITS, Frances S. **Suriname Folk-lore. Columbia University Publications in Anthropology 27**. New York: Columbia University Press, 1936;

In the course of four decades working with Saamakas (living with them, writing about their lives), I had come to see their culture as one that flaunted its heteronormativity. Saamakas positively celebrate their contrastive versions of masculinity and femininity both in their daily lives and in their imaginative arts, such as folktales and songs.

And then in 2002, I received an email from José Luis (“Luigi”) Ruíz-Peinado Alonso, an anthropologist from Barcelona, who had been doing ethnography with *remanescentes de quilombos* in the Brazilian Amazon. In the early 1940s, he had been told, a group of some eleven Saramaka men left the Saamaka village of Tampaki in French Guiana, on the Oyapock River (the border with Brazil), to seek their fortune in Belém.⁴ From there, they traveled up the Amazon, apparently as *garimpeiros*, and at least two of them ended up, via Óbidos and Oriximiná, settling in a village on the Erepecurú that belonged to descendants of a quilombo, where they stayed until their deaths of old age, apparently in the 1970s or 1980s. According to Luigi, inhabitants remember with fondness these two Saramakas (one named Gamma, who was about 40 when he arrived, the other Ze Dianka, who was around 30), recalling their distinctive Saramaka-style houses, canoes, and paddles, their exceptional skill as canoemen, their

VAN LIER, R.A.J. *Tropische tribaden. Een verhandeling over homoseksualiteit en homoseksuele vrouwen in Suriname*. Dordrecht: Foris, 1986; WEKKER, Gloria. *Ik ben een gouden munt, ik ga door vele handen, maar verlies mijn waarde niet: Subjectiviteit en seksualiteit van Creoolse volksklasse vrouwen in Paramaribo*. Amsterdam: VITA, 1994; VAN WETERING, W. Mati: The Lures and Dangers of Utopianism in Lesbian Studies. *Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present*, v. 5, n. 1, p. 140-144, 1998. Andrew Westoll implies that it was an American Peace Corps volunteer who introduced lesbian sex to Saamakas early in the new millennium (WESTOLL, Andrew. **The Riverbones: Stumbling After Eden in the Jungles of Suriname**. Toronto: Emblem, 2008. p. 263.

³ I've had similar discussions with educated friends from West Africa, who insist that male homosexuality is an exclusively French, or European, vice. Recent work on sexuality in the Black Atlantic suggests, however, that the insistence by sub-Saharan Africans on their societies' heteronormativity (and the denial of the existence of non-heterosexual relations in their communities) is the result of a long history of imposed colonial ideologies and practices and that precolonial Africa, like most places in the world, enjoyed a full range of sexual practices and identities (see, for example, EPPRECHT, Marc. **Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS**. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008.

⁴ Saamaka men had been migrating to Guyane to earn money and then returning home to Suriname since the 1860s. (I estimate that less than 1% of these migrants failed to return.) Soon after 1900, they established their largest village, Tampaki, on the lower Oyapock River. While living there, and in other sites in Guyane, Saamakas stayed together, continuing Saamaka life as in their villages along the Upper Suriname River, including their rigid ideas about gender and heteronormativity. For details of this history, including the relations between Saamakas and Brazilians through time, see PRICE, Richard. *Liberdade, Fronteiras e Deuses: Saramakas no Oiapoque (c. 1900)*. In: GOMES, Flávio dos Santos; CUNHA, Olívia Maria Gomes da. (eds.), **Quase-Cidadão: histórias antropologias da pós-emancipação no Brasil**. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2007. p. 119-146.

expertise in various rituals and curing, their extreme “blackness” of skin color, and fragments of songs and language the two men had taught them.

But they also remember that the two, who said they were brothers, lived together in a small house and didn’t take women either as wives or lovers. Apparently they were, the villagers finally told Luigi amidst much joking and embarrassment, lovers. “Another strange thing,” wrote Luigi, “is that

a man named Antonio Mello, who had three children by his first marriage, gave them to Gamma and Ze Dianka to raise. The three – Gandinho, Izanor and Maria – were adopted by them and lived with them for years. A long time afterward, when Ze Dianka lost a leg in an accident, Antonio took care of him till his death. (One of the Saamakás died in the village, the other in the hospital at Oriximiná.) Antonio still reveres their memory.

There is another person who lived near them and remembers them well, Maria de Souza. She can still sing songs the Saamakás taught her. She has a stupendous memory and can tell thousands of stories about them.... She once mentioned that they could no longer go home, that something had happened to them, but she has never wished to tell me more.

Ze Dianka was the person who introduced banana cultivation to the community, once taking as many as 6000 all by himself to sell in Óbidos and Oriximiná.

These two men were the favored canoemen of Protasio Friel, that strange character who started out as a [Roman Catholic] missionary and ended up as an anthropologist. Wherever he traveled in the parish of Oriximiná, it was Gamma and Ze Dianka who were his canoemen. They were expert at taking a canoe through the rapids and also spoke various Amerindian languages.⁵

Later, Luigi learned that two other Saamakás had accompanied Gamma and Dianka to the region in 1943 – Ze Charles (who fathered a daughter in Oriximiná) and Ze Ben – and that they panned for gold together around the Cachoeira do Mel. He wrote me with excitement about a return trip to the Erepecurú in 2003.

My girlfriend and I went up above the waterfalls and visited the site of the old quilombos, up above the Cachoeira do Mel. There's an island in the middle of the rapids with the same name and that's where Gamma built a shelter for when he would come to collect *castañas*. I took a photo of the

⁵ RUIZ-PEINADO ALONSO, José Luis. **Resistencia y Cimarronaje en Brasil: Mocambos del Trombetas**. Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Barcelona, 2001. p. 53-157 and various personal communications from him 2002-2003 and now 2013. The Saamakás first lived in Purake, one of the initial post-emancipation communities, founded as mocambeiros moved closer to other Brazilians. But that village was abandoned in the 1960s and the inhabitants moved to la Serrinha and soon after to nearby Javari.

spot, including the cashew tree he'd planted there. He also worked there as a hunter of jaguars.

On this same trip, Luigi wrote, Maria had generously allowed him to record the song that Gamma and Ze Dianka had taught her.

When I played the recording for my friend Tooy and other Saamakas in Guyane, none could recognize a single word, not to mention the melody – it bore no resemblance to anything any of them, or I, had ever heard. And when I told the story of these Saamakas on the Erepecurú to my close friend Adiante, a Saamaka who lives in Baltimore, he said that the only Saamaka he had ever heard of who never had a wife was his father's elder brother, Zonai, who set out from Tampaki around the time of WW II with a number of companions for Brazil – and never returned.

All of this made me wonder: Might Brazil – and the descendants of a *quilombo*! – have provided the only place on earth where gay Saamaka men felt comfortable?

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I was preparing to publish the above thoughts as a brief chapter in my book, *Travels with Tooy* (2008, 2010), when I made one last research trip to Tampaki and other Saamaka sites in Guyane. Going over this story with those elderly men who remained, I learned that they knew Gaama (as Saamakas pronounce his name) and Dianka, who had left Tampaki for Brazil at the outset of World War II. But more important, they insisted that the two were in fact brothers, with one father and one mother – they were also brothers of my old friend in Saamaka, the great historian Tebini who died about 1980 – and all three used Anka as their family name. So they were in fact siblings as they had claimed and probably not (I assume) a homosexual couple, as their Brazilian hosts had imagined.

But this does not really answer the initial question about Saamaka sexuality. Historian Luiz Mott caused an uproar in Brazil – and put himself in considerable personal danger – when he published evidence that Zumbi de Palmares might have been gay.⁶ I chose not to publish this brief chapter in *Travels with Tooy*, once I found that I had no firm evidence that gay Saamakas might have been among those men who left Saamaka for Guyane and thence for Brazil.

⁶ See, for example, MOTT, Luiz. *Crônicas de um gay assumido*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2003. p.155-160.

But there is more to the story. Despite the stringency of historical Saamaka sexual norms in their villages, which continued through the time of my fieldwork (1960s until the outbreak of the Suriname Civil War in 1986), younger Saamakas now say that there are indications of recent change: a cross-dressing man who lives in a Saamaka village and, in a different sort of incident, two young Saamaka boys who were seduced by a non-Saamaka schoolmaster.⁷ Since the Civil War, which ended in 1992, Saamaka territory has opened up considerably to the outside world and its influences. Today, I suspect, Saamaka men who wish to be openly gay simply move to Paramaribo, Amsterdam, or other more welcoming sites abroad.

It is also becoming clear, from recent research and thinking in Queer Studies (or Gay and Lesbian Studies), that same sex desires do not necessarily find their ideal expression in same sex relations – perhaps Gaama and Dianka desired above all a certain form of domesticity.⁸ (Keep in mind that the Brazilian community’s acceptance of a same sex male couple adopting and raising three children occurred long before such an arrangement would have been possible in most places in the world.) Nor, of course, are sexual identities and sexual behaviors necessarily conjoined. And silences about queerness may play roles in the Black Atlantic that differ from those in predominantly white metropolises.⁹ Moreover, Luigi Alonso now tells me that, looking over his old fieldnotes, he finds that “the oldest women in the community” told him that one of the brothers had “an effeminate manner, was [apparently] homosexual, and never had

⁷ Once the story became public, the teacher was fired and the boys sent off to the city.

⁸ I owe this insight to my colleague Vanessa Agard-Jones.

⁹ For several relevant examples of this burgeoning field of study, see AGARD-JONES, Vanessa. What the Sands Remember. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, v. 18, n. 2-3, p. 325-346, 2012; DECENA, Carlos Ulises. *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011; TINSLEY, Omise’eke Natasha. Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, v. 14, n. 2-3, p. 191-215, 2008. I would note, however, that in this nascent field of study, exuberance sometimes outruns evidence. For example, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley asserts that victims of the Middle Passage experienced same-sex desire and relations down in the holds, based in part on the etymology and ethnography of *mati* (and *sibi*) relations, which she attributes to WEKKER, Gloria. Op. Cit., p.145. (Wekker correctly footnotes MINTZ, Sidney W.; PRICE, Richard. *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Approach*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. p.44 as the scholarly source for the pan-hemispheric use of shipmate metaphors – and PRICE, Richard; PRICE, Sally. *Two Evenings in Saramaka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 for precisions about their use in Saamaka.) But Wekker is careful to make clear that in Saamaka *mati* (a term for close male friends) and the closely related but distinctive *sibi* (a term for close female friends) describe same-sex relationships that do not have homoerotic connotations, and she suggests that the same would seem to hold elsewhere in the Black Atlantic—except in the case of “*mati*-work” in coastal Suriname. Despite the legitimate emphasis in this literature about silences regarding sexuality in the Black Atlantic, ethnographic and historical evidence continues, in my view, to matter.

children in the region” though the other brother did father a child in a nearby community.¹⁰ Luigi also reports that in the communities of the Trombetas and Erepecurú – in contrast he claims to communities elsewhere in Brazil – male and female homosexuality, as well as bisexuality, are accepted and not at all infrequent.

My lack of historical evidence certainly does not rule out the possibility that out-migration has been an escape valve for gay Saamaka men since the late nineteenth century. Given that, historically, Saamakas in coastal Suriname or in French Guiana banded together and lived according to Saamaka home-based values, departure from the system might well have required going to Brazil, where sexuality was more fluid – ideologically to some extent, practically to an even greater extent. So it would make sense that Brazilian quilombos, which may have had more permissive attitudes about sexuality than other sites in Brazil, could have served as a preferred refuge for Saamakas who did not fit into their homophobic surroundings along the rivers of Suriname. In any case, these musings help confirm how very much we still have to learn about sexuality in the Black Atlantic in general and among Maroons or quilombolas in particular – a broad opening for future research.

¹⁰ Email of 1/15/2013.

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