
STATEMENT BY GAAMA SONGO, PARAMOUNT CHIEF OF THE SARAMAKA PEOPLE

Transcribed and Translated from Saramaccan by Richard Price

[Recorded at the request of Festival curators, forwarded by H.R.M. Libretto, District Commissioner of the Sipaliwini District, Suriname, and transcribed from tape cassette.]

So, Commissioner [Libretto], here I am again. I greet you. Well, I received your taped message. It's because of that taped message that I am speaking here, and it said I shouldn't talk too long. Just a very brief speech.

Well, my name is Songó. My name is Songó. I was made paramount chief on 19 December 1990 in the forest realm. Then they took me to the city to receive official [Suriname government] recognition on 15 April 1991. My tribe is Saramaka. My clan is Matjáu.

The earliest paramount chiefs received tribute [from the colonists], along with a little cash bonus they put into their hands. They maintained contact with the city government, but in those days travel was by paddle canoe. And then, after a long time, paddle canoes were replaced by motor canoes in the days of Paramount Chief Abóikóni [Songó's predecessor]. Chief Abóikóni traveled by outboard and large motor canoe, but he also went by airplane. By the time you get to Paramount Chief Songó's reign, things have surely changed!

With all these changes, we now travel by plane, or even [part way] by car, to get to the city. Well, the epoch you're born into, that's the one you have to deal with. The thing is, people say the whole world's changing, and the moment in which I find myself, that's the one I have to deal with.

But the responsibilities of the paramount chief do not change. The work that was left by Chief Abóikóni for Chief Songó to finish, that's what he is engaged in now. Well, there's nothing that I myself cause to change; if things change course, that's just the way it happens. This is the message I have for you.

The first paramount chief to go to the land of the whites was Chief Abóikóni, who went to

Europe. He was a member of the Matjáu clan! He went to Africa. He was a Matjáu! He went in the course of his duties. Then I came along and they gave me the chieftaincy, and now they are talking about the same kinds of duties again.

A message has come that I must go to the United States. Well, we don't know what they are taking us there to do. It's only once we're there that we'll really find out. But I have no duty higher than upholding the office of paramount chief to pass on to those younger folks who will be coming along later.

Now, I will say a prayer the way our ancestors did. Here in the forest realm, after an elder has participated in a council meeting, when he's ready to get up at the end, he'll spread the word to everyone and everywhere by saying a prayer. So, I'll say a prayer for the world in the tradition of the Matjáu clan.

This isn't an evil prayer! This prayer is good. This prayer makes children grow, makes them get big. Just the way the night and the day both make things grow. Because the night and the day are fertile. God created them to make things grow, to make the earth be fruitful. That's what this prayer says [in esoteric language]. That's what it is about.

It says, "*Ahúinkwádja. Ahúinkwádja. Ahúinkwádja. Awángamádesúsu. Awángamádesúsu.*" That's what this prayer says, speaking to all human beings, to the animals, to the birds and to the fish. So that they may multiply on this earth, so that people may live until they are old, may the Great God take good care of his family!

We'll stop here. We'll end our speech here. We'll end our prayer here. That's it, Commissioner. I have spoken.

[The esoteric formula in Chief Songó's prayer refers to an 18th century incident that took place soon after his enslaved ancestors rebelled and escaped to freedom in the forests — see Richard Price, *First-Time*, pp. 58-59.]

Gaamá Songó was recently installed as Paramount Chief of the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname, following the death of former Paramount Chief Abóikóni in 1989. He keeps his headquarters in Asindóópo on the Pikilío River, the traditional residence of the Saramaka Gaamá.