Price, Richard. Alábi's World (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1990). 444 pp.; bibliog.; illus.

The 20,000 Saramaka Maroons of Surinam are an Afro-American people whose identity is maintained by an oral tradition that recalls detailed pictures of people and events from a "first-time" in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Back then their ancestors arrived from Africa, escaped from plantation slavery, created autonomous communities, defended these against relentless repression, and forged a viable way of life in the unfamiliar South American rain forest. In 1762, the Saramakas and Dutch made peace on terms which, despite the continuing doubts which each entertained about the other's full status as human beings, permitted some two centuries of viable coexistence. As an elderly Saramaka told the first Dutch resident when he arrived: "Greetings, Master. If you curse me, I'll curse you back. That is the way this Peace works..." The defining characteristic of Saramaka culture is freedom, a term kept meaningful by the systematic preservation in collective memory of the humiliations and physical punishments of slavery, and the perfidy and cruelty of "whitefolks."

Anthropologists Richard and Sally Price have devoted a quarter of a century to the study of Saramaka history and culture -- including three years of field research and another three in (mostly Dutch) archives. The Saramaka elders have been astonishingly generous in sharing carefully-kept secrets with them; and the result is what must by now be as complete an ethnohistorical record as has yet been produced for a "nonliterate" people anywhere: an anthology of texts concerning maroon societies in the Americas; books on Saramaka art and social structure; an annotated field recording of Saramaka music; a historical and bibliographical study of the Guiana maroons; a critical edition of John Gabriel Stedman's classic Narrative of a Five Years Expedition aginst the Revolted Negroes of Surinam [1790]; and now by Richard Price alone, three closely related book-length studies of Saramaka life in the 18th century: First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People; To Slay the Hydra: Dutch Colonial Perspectives on the Saramaka Wars; and Alábi's World.

The first two of these volumes explored the period before the peace, when the maroon clans raided Dutch plantations to engross their numbers and acquire essential trade goods, and waged a perennial and very costly guerrilla war against Dutch punitive expeditions. First-Time assembled eloquent fragments from the oral tradition for those years, with a parallel narrative to place them in an ethnohistorical context. To Slay the Hydra gathered Dutch soldiers' accounts of the Saramakas during the same period. Both works ended with the peace treaty, celebrated on both sides yet viewed quite differently by them.

Alábi's World is that of the first half-century of peaceful coexistence, to about 1820. Here Price carries off the remarkable feat of constructing a narrative in four voices, each speaking from a different typeface: that of the expert older 20th-century Saramaka oral historians (whose faces and personalities are already familiar to readers of First-Time); that of the late 18th-century Dutch administrators (drawn from their official correspondence); that of certain sickly and ethnocentric German Moravian missionaries bent on converting the recently "pacified" Saramakas (who recorded their experiences in voluminous diaries); and

that of the ethnohistorian himself. By employing the very multivocality of his sources as a narrative device, Price seeks to relate a multifaceted history. The voices are, however, not equally audible. That of the Saramakas is of course sometimes difficult to follow because of its unfamiliar rhetoric and conceptual structure; that of the Dutch, because they observed Saramaka affairs from some distance and in this period had comparatively little to say about them. Those of the missionaries (whose exotic thought-world Price is at great pains to lay bare) and of the author himself (rather more "omniscient"-seeming than he perhaps intends) come through loud and clear.

Nevertheless, the book is a very engaging as well as a path-breaking inside history of an astonishingly independent "colonized" people, seen in their dealings with colonialism and with one another over an extended period of time. As a methodological tour de force it is enormously self-conscious: 278 pages of text require 154 of extended (if often compelling) "notes and commentary." Numerous maps, a variety of aptly chosen 18th-century graphic materials, facsimile reproductions of documents, even fragments of Saramaka music are placed so as to be read along with (rather than "illustrating") the text(s). Given the unfamiliarity and the comparative inaccessibility to both author and reader of Price's subject, the construction of Alábi's World required an infinitely patient attention to detail. Accordingly, this is a book which must be read very closely to be appreciated.

The peace treaty exchanged an agreement to refrain from raids on the Dutch plantations, and to return any future escaped slaves to their masters, for regular deliveries of trade goods, and free access to the Paramaribo market. In practice, the Dutch would seek to cut costs by keeping the deliveries of trade goods to a minimum, while the Saramakas endeavored to continue increasing their numbers by returning as few escaped slaves as possible; but both were reluctant to go back to war, and determined to make do with diplomacy. Village chiefs fought with one another and vied for preference in the distribution of goods and privileges. Alábi, emerging as the principal Saramaka leader of the period, was an early Christian convert who took a large role in keeping this fragile peace alive. An effective mediator with both the Dutch and the Moravians; he attempted to assist the missionaries in the conversion of his people. At this he failed, due to the vigorous resistance led largely by the Saramaka women (beginning with Alábi's wife); but since he was of chiefly lineage and character and was effective in dealing with the Dutch, that failure did not diminish his stature in the collective memory. The period of his chiefdom was in fact a time of the consolidation and growth of Saramakan society and culture; and Alabi's World will therefore be especially useful to scholars as an extended discussion of the social meaning of Christian conversion in a context of effective cultural resistance.

The Saramakas broke loose from some of colonialism's constraints a very long time ago, and established relations with the colonialists on something like their own terms. Their story is therefore of great interest to any student of the world's experience with colonialism. One of its lessons is that though the history of every people is a part of world history, shaped by world-historical processes, each people participates in world history in ways that are also partially of its own devising. The Saramakas have

endured and resisted a variety of external pressures: forced intercontinental migration, slavery, Christian missions, counter-insurgency warfare, unequal exchange, marginalization, even attempted genocide; yet Price makes it abundantly clear that at every stage their history has been made and lived in by themselves, and retold and thought about by themselves, to their own satisfaction and for their own purposes. Saramakan history runs parallel to a "national," and to a Dutch imperial and a world history made by others, of which of course it is in some senses a part; yet rather than allowing itself to be woven meekly into those histories, the Saramakas' story contradicts and reinterprets them in ways which are little influenced by any "dominant" narrative. Presumably, something like this has been the case with every people's history -- whether or not it has yet been studied by professional historians, and whether or not it is as carefully and self-consciously preserved in an oral tradition as is the Saramaka's. If that is so, we ought perhaps to begin to imagine a "world history" for the future which is rather more a continuing, shifting and never fully audible dialog between the Saramakas and the Irish, Navajos, Xhosas, Armenians, Tamils, Berbers, Inuits, Swiss and Tongans (as well as the North Americans, Western Europeans, Hindus, Arabs and Chinese) than an effort to construct all-encompassing narratives of any sort.

Alabi's World should serve as a forceful reminder that there are always at least two (usually many more) histories at play in every human encounter, and that as a result historical "truth" is more plural or multifacetic than it is generally allowed to be, even by the progressive-minded. Price's quadrivocal narrative, like John Berger's incorporation of texts with photographs, or the quick shifting of time and place in much modern fiction, is at first a bit awkward for the inexperienced reader to manage; but in the end it is also intensely persuasive, if one follows it closely and allows oneself to hear each witness with a measure of empathy. This is the tonic which has been lacking in so much of the discourse of the present quincentennial year, as celebrations of "discovery" appear to drown out soberer conmemorations of a fateful encounter which has given rise to infinite rapacity and suffering, as well as to five centuries of increasing interdependence among the several parts of our single world. The Saramakas contrived to create their own New World culture and history from African, Indian and European materials in the wake of the European conquest of these parts; they did so for nobody's profit and under nobody's supervision; they never did make sense to anybody but themselves; and by cracky, they are still here to tell the tale.

David G. Sweet

University of California, Santa Cruz