

Dorus Vrede

TRANSLATED BY SAM GARRETT



Return to Old Lombe

HE WAS LITTLE AND OLD, BUT HARD WORK IN THE WOODS ALONG THE Coppename had left him quite muscular. He was still spry for his age, but he had difficulty walking because of an old injury, a nasty ax wound on his knee. That's why he dragged his left leg when he walked.

This old man, Awanga, lived alone in his hut on a hill close to Afobaka. Every morning he stood up and looked out at the powerful dam. His gaze would then wander off to the south, where his native village Lombe had once been. Awanga would see himself, young and strong, in his corial. His wife Yayomai sat in the bow. He loved her. He also saw his house and the *obia hut* (shaman's hut) of his father, Mataibo, which stood at the base of a huge Kankan tree. Many people in Awanga's family enjoyed a prestige resulting from their good relations with the obia. And his father's services as obia man were in particular demand among the villagers. Even people from other villages and other rivers came to Mataibo for help. When this obia man died, Awanga took over his task. For this he had been trained his whole life.

The death of his wife Yayomai upset him greatly. He heard from friends that there was a woman living in a village on the Coppename who bore a striking resemblance to Yayomai.

"I'm going there and I'm not coming back until I've married her," Awanga said with enthusiasm. He dropped everything and left for the Coppename, full of good hope. There he actually met the woman who was Yayomai's double. Everyone called her Sisi Mulingi, and she was beautiful and friendly. She had had only one man in her life. After his death, Mulingi swore never to take another. No matter how Awanga tried, he could not win her heart. He did receive permission to settle in the village, for he was a shaman and therefore a very important person. Awanga built his hut and lived a lonely but peaceful life.

They had started building a dam before he had left his native village. The people who lived in the area had been told they would have to leave their villages once the construction was finished. A reservoir would rise behind the dam, and the villages would disappear beneath it. But few people really believed this. How could they ever leave this place where they had lived for hundreds of years? This region with its wealth of fish, birds and wild animals, timber and fruit? The white man surely

wanted to evict them so he could come live here himself. No, they weren't about to leave.

But they did leave, once the dam was built. The great chief of the tribe himself was present at the official ceremony for the closing of the floodgates. The water, which had followed its course from the mountains to the sea for thousands of years, was suddenly stopped in its tracks. It began to swell, left its banks and took the first village as its prey. Many others followed. The inhabitants had to leave; many of them had no idea where they were going.

Awanga's village was also threatened. They called on him to come back quickly and bring the divinity to safety. The journey from the Coppename to the Saamakka, as the Saramaccans called their river, was long. When he reached the village, it had already been flooded. Impoverished and disappointed, Awanga decided to spend the rest of his life at Afobaka. A fisherman who had pity on him gave him a hut on top of a hill. From there he had a good view of the reservoir. Every day, as he looked out from his hilltop to the south, he hoped to return to Lombe someday, to speak with his fathers.

One morning the old man left his house, a gourd in one hand. The gourd contained a piece of *pembadoti* (terra alba) and a little bottle of *drama* (strong drink). A paddle, a chopper and his *gwalakka*, an antique rifle he had inherited from his grandfather, were already in the corial. The weapon was no longer used for shooting, but it had mysterious powers that protected the old man. Awanga put the gourd in the boat and took his place in the stern. Then he pushed the boat out onto the lake and began to paddle. The wind helped him, pushing the corial. Before him lay the wide reservoir with its endless mass of dead trees rising up ghostlike from the water.

He arrived at a part of the lake where there were no trees. The wind blew harder and the boat went on even faster. Awanga smiled. Now he only had to steer. To get there more quickly he avoided the river and took the shortcuts. He had to be at his fathers' before the late afternoon. The village was no longer there, but the mighty trunk of the Kankan tree would be standing proudly above the water's surface. The spirits still lived there. Awanga was in a hurry to reach the tree, for it was his only hope. Yet in fact he was pleased with the speed his corial was making.

"The gods are with me," he said to himself. "I must be crazy to long for more." As a sign of gratitude he broke off a piece of *pemba* and threw it into the water. Then he sang a song his father had taught him back in the days when they went to the city by corial. This song for the water gods was a prayer to keep the waters calm:

Afo Awintia eeh
teki njang-njang ooh
Piki mieh ta abba zé
foe go na Majongo Dawme.

Grandmother Awintia
accept this food
Your children are crossing
the ocean on
their way to Majongo Dawme.

This song had always summoned up a powerful longing among the elders. Awanga was overpowered by a great homesickness for a country far across the sea. His eyes filled with tears.

The wind had died down. The water was as smooth as glass. Awanga was pleased with this too, even though it meant he had to work more with his paddle. It wouldn't have been good if the wind had picked up further. The water could become more turbulent, and that would put too much of a strain on the old man's powers. He paddled on quietly in the hope and expectation of reaching Lombe. He stopped for a few minutes to pray at the place where the Wakibasu now lay underwater, for this was the birthplace of his father.

Every village that now lay at the bottom of the lake, deep below the dark water, caused him grief as he paddled above them. When he was young it would have taken him one hour to paddle from Wakibasu to Lombe. Now it took him longer, now that he was no longer young.

Around noon he passed the cove at Gran Lombe, which he recognized from the big Tonka tree. Gran Lombe was the cove of his youth. Here he had whistled the fish song for the first time. He remembered how he had whistled and lured the krobias up from the depths. Here he brought his corial to a halt. He was tired. His eyes closed. When he opened them again he saw the Kankan tree in the distance.

"Pada, pada!" he called out, egging himself on. His heart pounded faster in excitement with every dip of the paddle that brought him closer to the tree. It had been years since his old heart had pounded so hard. At this moment, Awanga lived only in expectation of the meeting with his faithful old Kankan tree. He rose to his feet. His lame leg didn't even bother him. No, there was no time to think about that leg. He went on paddling, standing up. Only fifty meters were between him and the tree of his life.

Birds familiar from Awanga's youth that had nested in the Kankan tree were still there, although there were not as many as in the past. They startled up from their perches for a moment at the old man's approach, but then settled back again, as if to welcome him. An iguana that had been clinging to the tree jumped into the water in fear. But then he too swam back to the tree and hid himself among the mass of plants clinging to the waterlogged wood.

"Don't be afraid," said Awanga, who now had reached the tree. "We are partners in adversity, we are all victims of Lindéma." For that was the name the Saramaccans had given to the engineer Lindeman, the man who had supervised the construction of the dam.

The old man trembled in his desire to feel the tree, but he did not touch it yet. He felt guilty for

his absence during the transmigration. He had not been at his father's grave to bid him farewell. The obia hut with its divinities had disappeared beneath the water. Awanga still had to ask permission to speak with his fathers and the divinities.

Around his upper right arm was an iron ring that he had worn for more than fifty years. He only took the ring off when it was absolutely necessary. Now the moment had come for Awanga to take off this magic ring. A deep groove remained in Awanga's arm where the ring had been. He let the corial drift a few meters from the Kankan tree, so that he could tie its rope to a branch in preparation for the ritual to come. He broke off a piece of pembadoti and dissolved it in a mixture of water and dram that he had poured into the gourd. Then he tied a piece of twine to the ring, which he held in the gourd so that the power of the contents could be absorbed. Awanga removed the ring and wound the end of the twine around his index finger. He moved to the middle of the corial and held the ring just above his knees. The ring hung there, motionless. Even the wind did not move it. Very quietly, as though only thinking aloud, the words passed Awanga's lips: "Obia, I have fallen in the eyes of my father, but I have come in the hope of being forgiven. Is that right: will I be forgiven?" The ring hung still. This frightened Awanga a bit, but he recovered and calmly asked: "Will my father and the gods speak to me, obia?" Now the ring swung quietly back and forth. This gave Awanga hope.

"Kr Will! myyyy father Mataibo, Afo Kwassi M'Kamba, speak to me in the name of Kedjama Kedjampo? Will they speak to their son, Wangainaito?" The ring swung wildly back and forth. Awanga was so pleased, he began to hum a song of thanks. Thanks to his father and the gods who had mercy on him. He was sure of himself, and he was satisfied.

"Di andeloe akki fia fia wan," he murmured as he watched the ring. "In truth, this ring is genuine," he repeated. He wrapped the twine around the ring and put it back on his arm. He untied the corial and paddled, now unafraid and full of longing, towards the Kankan tree. When he reached the tree he knelt in the boat for better balance. He spread his arms and hugged the tree passionately. Power flowed into him. He shook like a little bush in a waterfall. His eyes were ablaze. The Kromanti took possession of him.

Obla, obla, mi doro, mi doro
Mi doro mi tata mi doro
Pikien m'wana kon takki grn soema odi
baka dati awani go na Ajanikaa.

Greetings, greetings, I am here, I am here
I, child of the forest
I am here, my father, I am here
I want to greet you first and then I wish
to enter the kingdom of the dead.

Calabash

Sa baba, sa baba pikien m'wana
Moesoetoegado nanga den pikien f' em
no frigiti joe
Pikien m'wana sa feni libi na Ajanikaa.

Welcome, welcome my child
The gods of the wood and their sons
have not forgotten you
For you there is surely a place
beside your fathers.

The meeting with the divinities lasted all afternoon. Finally the Kromanti left Awanga. A bit dazed, he lay in the bobbing corial. A cool evening breeze blew across the water. It made the old Awanga forget that he still had a great many hours of paddling ahead of him. Sleep took him for an hour.

He awoke only when his corial struck against a tree trunk. He sat up, startled. He dipped his gourd into the water, washed his face and braced himself for the journey home. Again he passed through the multitude of bare trees and, because the wind was in his face, it was harder to paddle. The night was no problem, for the moonlight cast everything in a fabulous beauty. He would have liked to see a picture of himself, there alone in his corial amid a huge expanse of water and endless rows of dead trees. And with millions of stars in the distance. He would have saved the picture in his suitcase. Then he would take it out from time to time to look at it.

Just the way he sometimes removed the picture of Yayomai and himself from the suitcase and looked at it for a long time. He must have been twenty-five back then, and his wife barely eighteen. The picture was taken by an American who liked the young couple. Awanga was wearing khaki shorts and a white undershirt with short sleeves. Just below his knees were the beautiful leg bands Yayomai had knitted for him. Yayomai was wearing a *pangi* [kerchief] and was bare from the waist up. That was before she had children, back when her breasts were still very lovely. Awanga never allowed them to photograph his wife or himself after that, for he had heard that the Americans sold these portraits.

The corial slid quickly and easily between the trees. Thinking about the past had done the old man good. Now he was close to Afobaka. Lights were on in the huts and the shop on the hill. He couldn't see his own hut very clearly. It stood half-hidden behind the tall weeds. Awanga had glanced at the dam, but turned away again quickly. That monstrosity made him feel impotent and angry. He paddled harder. He wanted to get home quickly, to look at that picture, especially at Yayomai's face. Remembering her had awakened something in him.

He paddled the way he had in one of the corial races long ago, when he had won a silver necklace and a mirror for his Yayomai. The corial touched bottom and ran up onto the shore. Awanga stood

up and tied a loop in the boat's rope through which he was just able to push a heavy stone. Now the boat could not float away. The old man took a quick bath, there on the spot. The water was warm and he felt wonderful.

He climbed out of the river onto the bank. The wet *kamisa* stuck to his hips and thighs. He quickly took the agwalakka in one hand, the chopper and the paddle in the other, and climbed the hill. He used the paddle to push aside the old hammock that served as his door. He opened his old *agwagidiwaja* (metal suitcase) and took out a clean *kamisa* and a jacket. After he had put on these clothes, he took from the suitcase a neatly folded loincloth in which he kept the portrait. He unfolded it and took out the picture. He had neither matches nor kerosene, so he could not light the tamoendoe. He walked outside to admire the picture in the light of the moon. He couldn't see Yayomai's face very well, for the moonlight was not clear enough and his eyes were no longer what they had been. But he could see a little bit, and what he could not see he imagined.

"One day, when I come to her, I will see her face clearly, in all its detail," he sighed as he went back inside. He placed the picture in the *kamisa* and folded it neatly again. Then he lay down. He was still holding the *kamisa*, but when he began to feel sleepy he placed it under his head as a pillow.

Half asleep now, he murmured about the events of the day: "It's a good thing to believe in your fathers, it is a very good thing." He searched for words to express his gratitude, but the words would not come. "What can I say? God of my river, you have led me safely, thank you for this. Moon, your wife, your children, thank you for the light. Yes, it is good to believe. Yes, Lindéma, you are only a man after all."

Mumbling incoherently, he fell asleep. The light of the moon through the many holes in the hut lit upon him. His face, with his eyes shut, was that of a saint immersed in deep and endless prayer.

A few hours later the moon paled. The sun's rays entered the hut and shone across Awanga's face. But he just lay there as he was: he did not stir, his eyes were closed and on his face appeared the trace of a contented smile, at rest.

