



Latin American Literary Review

VOLUME 51 / NUMBER 102 SPRING 2024

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BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

Shiffman 109, MS 024

Waltham, MA 02453

Email: lalr.editors@gmail.com

Website: www.lalrp.net

DOSSIER: Words and Rhythm, Sound and Text

Moving Beyond Words: Awasa and Apinti in a Suriname Maroon Communicative Matrix

Corinna Campbell

Williams College

csc3@williams.edu

ORCID: 0009-0002-4033-4753

ABSTRACT: In the Suriname Maroon dance genre *awasa*, much of performers' expressive work can be described as having some kind of conversational aspect. While this idea finds broad resonance with other African Diasporan genres, *awasa*'s use of rhythmic cues and phrases in the drummed language *apinti*, and the population's diminishing fluency in *apinti*, demonstrates the need for clarity and precision when discussing components of choreo-musical interaction. In this case, the shift from drummers and dancers being *in* a conversation to interacting in a way that *resembles* a conversation can signal the loss of deeply valued cultural knowledge. Here I argue that the subtleties of message and meaning in *awasa* can only be understood in light of particularities in language, syntax, and word play that contribute to a Maroon communicative matrix. First, I consider the ostensibly non-lexical *gi futu* section of *awasa* in relation to interactions in *apinti* language that precede it. Second, I argue that whereas *awasa* may seem peripheral to *apinti* drum language, it is also a vital training ground for the aspiring *apinti* drummer. Third, I discuss *gi futu* ("give foot") relative to other social gestures that are expressed as being given (for instance giving thanks or giving greeting). Finally, I demonstrate how choreo-rhythmic *futu* patterns are functionally similar to descriptive words known as ideophones. This multi-dimensional approach to processes of meaning-making serves as a corrective to descriptive shorthands through which conversation and interaction are assumed to be functional equivalents.

KEYWORDS: Suriname, Maroon, drum language, dance, choreo-musical interaction, communicative matrix, *apinti*, *awasa*

RESUMEN: En el género de danza *awasa* de las comunidades cimarronas de Surinam, gran parte del trabajo expresivo de los artistas parece exhibir un aspecto conversacional. Si bien esta idea encuentra resonancia con otros géneros afrodiaspóricos, el uso en *awasa* de señales y frases rítmicas en el lenguaje de tambor *apinti*, y la fluidez decreciente de la población en *apinti*, demuestra la necesidad de claridad y precisión al discutir los componentes de la interacción coreo-musical. El paso de los tamborileros y bailarines estar en conversación a imitar una conversación puede implicar la pérdida de un conocimiento cultural valorado. Sostengo que las sutilezas del mensaje y el significado en *awasa* solo pueden entenderse a la luz de las particularidades del lenguaje, la sintaxis y el juego de palabras de una matriz comunicativa cimarrona. En primer lugar, considero la sección aparentemente no léxica de *awasa* *gi futu* en relación con las interacciones en la lengua *apinti* que la preceden. En segundo lugar, argumento que, aunque el *awasa* pueda parecer periférico al lenguaje del tambor *apinti*, es un campo de entrenamiento vital para el aspirante tamborilero de *apinti*. En tercer lugar, analizo el *gi futu* ("dar el pie") en relación con otros gestos sociales que se expresan como "dados" (por ejemplo, dar gracias o dar saludos). Por último, demuestro cómo los patrones coreo-rítmicos del *futu* son funcionalmente similares a palabras descriptivas conocidas como ideófonos. Este enfoque sirve como correctivo a descripciones abreviadas que suponen una equivalencia funcional entre la conversación y la interacción.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Surinam, cimarrón, lenguaje de tambor, danza, interacción coreo-musical, matriz comunicativa, *apinti*, *awasa*.

It's December 2021. I'm sitting with drummer, researcher, and Maroon cultural activist Andre Mosis—Omu Andre—in his living room in Paramaribo. I've sought his advice and perspective about *awasa*,¹ a widely popular dance tradition of the Ndyuka Maroons of Suriname. In particular, I'm curious about a section of *awasa* called *gi futu* ("give foot"). This section is the climax of the excitement in *awasa*, in which a lead drummer (*gaandoonman*) and dancer (or dancers) improvise on choreo-rhythmic phrases, known as *futu*. Their animated, collaborative exchange presents an opportunity for each dancer to demonstrate their virtuosity and style—without fail, it garners the most cheers and sparks the liveliest commentary, which often lingers well after the dancing has ended. When describing and analyzing *awasa* I felt at a loss how to account for the interactive character and creative range that drummers and dancers brought to the performance. Here with Omu Andre, I was hoping to delve deeper into this moment when the excitement of the dance reaches its peak.



Fig. 1. Noeki André Mosis, celebrated percussionist and Maroon cultural advocate. Photo courtesy of Noeki André Mosis.

The *gi futu* section of *awasa* differs dramatically from the drumming and dancing that precedes and follows it. In contrast to

the *gi futu* section's improvised exchange of kinesthetic rhythms, the dance begins and ends with the lead drummer communicating with the dancers using phrases derived from the drummed language, *apinti*.² I found it remarkable that *gi futu*, which appears to be the most intensely interactive section of the dance, occurs at precisely the point when the lead drummer stops "speaking" in the *apinti* drum language and takes up what Kwabena Nketia terms dance mode (17-31), which, "in principle, severs its connections with speech and under-writes the cultivation of purely musical rhythms" (Agawu 128). Omu Andre nods, and then adds, "But what happens beforehand, before they *gi futu*?"³ He then proceeds to illustrate the interconnection of *awasa*'s various sections. As he does so, he shifts easily between phrases in the *apinti* drum language, onomatopoeic syllables that describe different drum strokes or a dancer's foot-falls, and instructive asides:

The *gaandoonman* plays:

[in the drummed syllables of the *anwanwi* category of *apinti*]

Zen gi gen den, azigidi gen ti gen den, gen ti
Ken ti gedengeden ken ti gedengeden, ken ti
gedengeden, Ka t'gen

That's to say, he calls a woman:

[he articulates the same rhythm, in the *kumanti'pinti* style of *apinti*, closer to Maroon spoken languages]

A uman a kai, a sidon bodjoo, a pikinuman sidon
bodjoo, i de?
I kaba kelle kelle, i kaba kelle kelle, I kaba kelle kelle?
Waka kon

[in *anwanwi*] Ken ti keden keden ken ti keden

[paraphrasing to me]

'With what kind of foot will you dance' [what style of dancing will you do—the more masculine *mannengeefutu* style or the feminine *umanpikinfutu*].⁴ It's those things they talk about beforehand.

And when he drums like that, then a woman who dances who understands the drum like how my wife here does [gestures to Lucia Tojo, who listens on from the kitchen], then she'll do so [stamps his foot] then you'll see that she gives her foot.

Then he gives her:

[in *anwanwi*]

Gedegedi, gedegedi, gedegedi ge gi,
 gen ti gen ki, ken ti gede gede,
 Azigidi ken ti ken, azigidi ken ti gedegede,
 a de kede ke ki, ken ti ken kede ke ki
 ke kin kin kentin ke

With that there you boli wataa. Yah? Then you [as a dancer] come:

[Emulating a dancer's shuffling ambulatory steps, made audible via kawai ankle rattles, made from seed shells]

Tjotjoo tjotjoo tjotjoo tjotjoo...

Then when you arrive, he stops it— "gii!"

Then you see that they end in synchrony, the dancer's foot and the dancer's hand end in unison— "tja!" *And it's only then that they'll gi futu.*

[He gives an example of a choreo-rhythmic futu pattern]:

Giin- ga tji ka tji ka ginjin
 Giin- ka tji ka tji ka ginjin
 Giin- ka tji ka tji ka

Then the woman will dance like this, dance like this [he sways right and left as he sits.] *Because they talked about these things beforehand!*

When it's finished the gaandoonman will play:
 [in anwanwi]

Keen keden, keen keden,
 kidikiden, kidikiden

Then, the woman understands she should dansi gwe [dance back to the perimeter of the space]. Her... her flow has ended.

Omu Andre's explanation illustrated the functional cues that mark each section in turn— *boli wataa* and *waka kon* (with which the dancer moves into the dance space), *gi futu*, and *dansi gwe* (ambulatory dancing back to the perimeter of the dance space). In the hands of a seasoned gaandoonman and among people adept at understanding his cues, the opening sequence is no less improvisatory than the virtuosic dancing in *gi futu*; a gaandoonman may call on men or women to dance, he may do so in more or less formal ways, inviting them one at a time or to dance together. Regardless of the particulars of these opening negotiations, Omu Andre's point was that, while *gi futu* might be the most emblematic part of awasa, it cannot be interpreted or performed in isolation of the overall sequence of events that take a dancer from the sidelines into the dancing space and back again.

In effect, he challenged me to consider interconnectivity of communication: that although the dancer and drummer's improvisations in *gi futu* may seem self-contained within that one segment of the dance, their interactions rested upon a collaborative foundation they had established in their opening exchanges. Put differently, their initial negotiations at the beginning of the dance guide their subsequent improvisational choices. This is important, Omu Andre emphasized, because these days people are so hasty to get to the flashier footwork of the *gi futu* that they ignore the interactions that are part of awasa's dance protocol. Or worse, eager young performers (especially those living outside of the Maroon traditional areas in the hinterlands) don't even know these protocols exist or how to hear them.

As the weight of his point settled, he mentioned a popular Maroon music and dance group in Paramaribo that was at that time co-led by his nephew, who is also a talented drummer. He told me, "I'll go to them and I'll show them what we've been talking about, because they're just hitting the drum and dancing. The difference between earlier and now is that before, people communicated with the drum; now they're just playing rhythms. It isn't happening with understanding anymore." His appraisal of another well-known music and dance group in Paramaribo was even starker—despite their widespread popularity, Omu Andre judged the communicative element when they danced awasa to be "utterly dead."

By this logic, even when a drummer and dancer appear to be having a lively exchange in *gi futu*, should they fail to demonstrate comprehension of (or adherence to) the communication and social cues in preparation for this improvisatory section, they risk being dismissed as not "saying" much of anything. By itself, rhythmic synchronization or complementarity in *gi futu* might indicate that drummer and dancer are listening to each other, but *understanding* as Omu Andre expressed it here draws importantly on aspects of form and language-based models of interaction.

These comments shed light on what's at stake should the improvised choreo-musical interactions in awasa be portrayed as metaphorically linked to language (i.e., language- or conversation-like) rather than as making explicit use of speech forms and vocabularies—be they verbal, corporeal, or drummed. Beneath the more readily accessible (and also vital and important) links to a conversational interactive aesthetic that awasa shares with many other improvisational forms in Africa and the African Diaspora, there are additional, particular communicative dynamics at work that give this conversation (or mode of conversationality) its specificity and social resonance. Omu Andre's comments indicate his concern that people aren't sufficiently attending to the latter.⁵ Indeed, should the interactive dynamics shift from *being* a conversation to *resembling* a conversation, that shift would signal a grave loss.

Here I present some of these interactive qualities that connect *gi futu* to the communicative logic of awasa as a whole, and demonstrate how those logics contribute to a Maroon communicative matrix in which lexical or semantic expression utilizes a broader sonic palette

as a matter of course. Using examples from both my own fieldwork and existing scholarship, I show how collective recollections of *gi futu* can live on and be reincorporated into conversations and interactions (verbal and otherwise), well after a performance has ended. In so doing, I aim to trouble ready assumptions about how concepts of conversation, referentiality, and meaning making interrelate across expressive modalities on local and culturally specific levels.

Awasa Gaan Doon and Apinti: The Dynamics of Speech

Apinti (also known as *apinti tongo*, apinti language) is a communicative technology that is shared among all six of the Suriname Maroon populations (the Ndyuka/Aukan, Saamaka, Pamaka, Aluku/Boni, Kwinti, and Matawai), though it may differ in how it is rendered among those groups. With many words derived from West African languages (in particular, Asante Twi), apinti seems to affirm the Suriname Maroons' enduring and exceptionally strong ties to West African cultural practices, made possible through their escape from Suriname's plantations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and subsequently their greater cultural self-determination outside of the plantation system.⁶ Up to the present day, communication in apinti marks a wide array of occasions of social, political, and religious importance.⁷ Apinti messages are delivered by an individual who has undergone intensive training in the language and its embedded meanings and spiritual implications. In many formal public gatherings, an apintiman will be joined by a *puuman*, whose job it is to offer a verbal interpretation of what has been drummed for the wider public. Though its patterns can be verbalized or translated, apinti is most fully realized through the tonal and textural articulations of the drum.

The lead drumming part in awasa and the apinti language can both be played on the same drum, or drums that may appear to be nearly identical. This drum is most commonly known as the apinti drum (*apinti doon* in the Okanisi language), but Maroon percussionists often clarify that apinti is the name of the language, not a category of instrument. Traditionally, a community or village will maintain a drum explicitly for rendering the apinti language for community events, yet outside of those instruments reserved expressly for rendering apinti, I was told it is preferable to refer to drums made in that style simply as *doon* (drum). Nonetheless, in a colloquial setting, and to distinguish drums of this general shape from other varieties, these drums are most commonly referred to as apinti doon.⁸ As the colloquialism demonstrates, this particular drum's sound and shape maintain an association with language and the ability to communicate, even when the drummer is not actively using a linguistic modality.

In awasa, three drums of this general shape make up the core of the percussive ensemble. The role each drum will play in the musical mix is determined by its pitch and timbre relative to the others; the lead part is played on the low, resonant *gaan doon*, while the supporting *pikin doon* should have a higher pitch, and the *tun*, which

performs a timekeeping role, typically has a comparatively flat or muffled tone. Thus, the same drum might function as a *gaan doon* in one context and a *pikin doon* or *tun* in combination with different instruments.⁹ I have provided more in-depth analysis of the various roles and interrelationships among singers, dancers, and percussionists in awasa elsewhere (Campbell "Personalizing Tradition"; "Cultural Work") my primary focus here is on the communicative capacities of the *gaan doon*, specifically as the *gaandoonman* interacts with dancers and community members or potential participants.



Figure 1: Drummers in the social-cultural organization Kifoko relax during a break. From left: unknown player at the *pikin doon*, group director Eddy Lante with the *tun*, Herman Tojo with the *gaan doon*. All three drums are of a construction style colloquially described as *apinti doon*. Photo by Grete Vidal, 2014.

Both a *gaandoonman* and an apintiman are responsible for communicating to their respective audiences;¹⁰ a *gaandoonman* even utilizes select phrases in the apinti language as he communicates to his audiences during awasa performance. A knowledgeable *gaandoonman* communicates using a combination of the two styles of apinti playing: *kumanti'pinti* and its more formal and complex counterpart, *anwanwi*.¹¹ For all their overlaps and commonalities, however, the roles of apintiman and *gaandoonman* remain firmly delineated.

The respected apintiman Da Tali Malonte makes this separation clear in an interview with his nephew, playwright Tolin Alexander. Recalling how he began learning apinti, Da Tali commented:

It's not with apinti that I learned to play drum. Awasa... all sorts of drums I played. Me? I played all kinds of drums. All of the drums that Businengee [Maroons] play, I learned them first. When I was eighteen years old, I started learning to play apinti. When I began learning apinti, my father brought me to my grandfather. And my grandfather told him, 'No—I won't teach him. He's too

young. Apinti doon can kill people. If you don't know what you should play, it'll kill you. So, wait until he grows up some more then I will teach him. But make him find some kasembuba [herbs], then he can peel them and boil them and wash his hands with them. I'll show him only how to do that, I won't show him apinti. He's still young.' So, from then on, I played a little, I played a little, I listened to how the elders were playing, I played a little more..."

(Alexander, "Cottica Territory"; my translation.)

Whereas Da Tali was already adept at playing awasa gaan doon before he was eighteen, his decision to learn apinti in earnest raised different concerns for his father and grandfather. His recollection leaves little doubt as to how seriously people take apinti language.

Apinti connects Maroons to their ancestors, as well as the early history of Maroon societies, including their ancestors' escape from enslavement and their struggles for survival against the Dutch colonial regime.¹² This early period is called First-Time (*fosi-ten* in Okanisi; *fési-tén* in Saamakan); histories or elements of cultural practice from First-Time are considered to be imbued with tremendous spiritual power, capable of exerting direct influence on people and circumstances. Da Tali's grandfather instructed him how to prepare a medicinal wash for hands as one initial means of spiritual protection in his long journey to becoming an apintiman. Améiká, a Saamaka elder, confirms the spiritual potency of First-Time knowledge in an earlier conversation with Richard Price: "First-Time kills people. That's why it should never be taught to youths . . . That's why, when you pour a libation at the ancestor shrine, you must be careful about speaking in proverbs [because you may not be aware of all their hidden implications]. There are certain [people's] names that, if you call them, you're dead right on the spot! There are names that can't be uttered twice in the course of a whole year!" (*First-Time* 7).

In awasa, a gaandonman's use of apinti phrases is taken very seriously, but his tasks in introducing and directing the course of the dance do not require that he delve into the most spiritually charged realms of apinti—those phrases, points of historical or geographical reference, or names of individuals and spirits deemed most potent and therefore involving the most risk. He can perform his role effectively with a much more limited vocabulary. This is what made it possible for Da Tali to play awasa gaandon before the age of eighteen without raising concerns among his family. It is also this separation that allowed me as a researcher and an outsider to be able to talk with Maroons about how the gaandonman communicates without encroaching on knowledge that is not intended for me to access. I have devoted years to learning how to dance awasa, and being able to understand what a gaandonman is instructing me to do is an important component of that task—one that is entrusted to the general public. Rendering apinti on a drum remains the purview of men, but interpreting apinti phrases is not restricted by gender.¹³

A gaandonman will use apinti phrases at the beginning of a performance or ritual event, honoring the drum on which he plays,

the supreme deities who rule over all things, and the ancestor spirits who continue to intervene in the lives of their descendants. Subsequently, he will recognize respected leadership and elders in their midst. A more knowledgeable gaandonman may follow this opening with commentary or proverbial wisdom related to the particular circumstances of performance. Awasa is performed during the funerary rites *puu baka* and *booko dei*, which helps to usher a person's spirit into the realm of the ancestors and to conclude the period of mourning. When it is performed as part of a funerary rite or an important occasion, awasa is the last in a sequence of dances, called the *gaansamapee*.¹⁴ The dance can also be performed at informal or recreational gatherings, ranging from casual get-togethers to birthday parties or political rallies, often presented outside the gaansamapee sequence of events that marks more formal or ceremonial occasions. Once awasa is underway, a gaandonman with knowledge of apinti can comment or direct the flow of events in between songs, and he must be able to use apinti-derived phrases to direct dancers in the course of their dance, as Omu Andre illustrated earlier.

Even with this limited application of apinti, playing awasa gaandon can entail risk. Omu Eddy Lante, one of the leaders of the Paramaribo-based social-cultural organization Kifoko (which Omu Andre founded in 1983),¹⁵ commented to me how their then-gaandonman had to exercise abundant caution, especially during important events where Maroon elders might be in attendance. These elders were sure to listen keenly to make sure Kifoko's gaandonman was performing the rhythms properly. Omu Eddy commented, "Sometimes you're just playing one little thing [on the drums], then someone will tell you [to stop. If you don't know what you're doing], you can make a spirit come without your wanting it!"¹⁶ Omu Eddy offers a useful reminder that, just as there are risks in playing what one knows under the wrong circumstances, there are also risks involved in communicating something on the drum unintentionally or without one's full comprehension. The pressure of playing correctly weighs heavily on an awasa gaandonman and continues to escalate as he furthers his study in apinti.

While visiting with the senior leadership of the group Kifoko in 2019, I asked for clarification on how the gaandonman's communications in awasa relate to apinti. I mentioned that the Maroon scholar Andre Pakosie had specified to me that the gaandonman's language-based phrases are predominantly rendered in *kumanti'pinti* ... is this how they understand it as well? Even as I asked the question, I noticed how mentioning apinti changed the dynamics of our conversation. Sa Maria Dewinie and Sa Lucia Pinas took care with their words as they responded:

Sa Maria: Awasa and apinti are not the same. Though he may be able to communicate with some select phrases in apinti, an awasa gaan doonman can't say he knows apinti.

Sa Lucia [nodding]: Apinti and awasa aren't one.

Sa Maria: A good awasa gaandonman, he must know apinti. But if you can play awasa, you can't say that you know apinti. You know derivative phrases from apinti.

Sa Lucia voiced her agreement and concluded by saying of the awasa gaandonman, "*A sabi peemi en ma a á sab' puu en*" (He knows how to play it but he doesn't know how to utilize or interpret it), which neatly distinguishes between playing the specific patterns required for the functional progression of events within an awasa performance (*peemi*)—and interpreting (*puu*) apinti language. As she described it, the gaandonman must know how to recreate drum patterns, but may lack deeper fluencies. She used the word "puu"—derived from pull, in English—referencing the *puuman* whose job it is during ritual events to interpret and translate into speech (pull meaning from) the apintiman's expressions for the enjoyment and contemplation of the broader community. Thus, beyond an apintiman's expanded vocabulary, the skills that an apintiman *must* have that are *not guaranteed* of a gaandonman are fluency and flexibility in terms of when and how to deploy language.¹⁷

Two years later, as I discussed connections between awasa and apinti with Omu Andre, he interpreted the relationship between gaandonman and apintiman differently. He didn't refute what Sa Maria and Sa Lucia had said, but rather than focusing on the gaandonman's limitations, he drew attention to the ways that an awasa gaandonman actively engages skills that set him up well for beginning to learn apinti. Certainly, Da Tali's comments seem to reinforce Omu Andre's point—his proficiency in awasa and other kinds of social drumming practiced by Suriname Maroons was how he got his start.

According to Omu Andre, "In awasa, communication is vitally important. Because of that, it's only after you know how to play gaan doon that you can say that you can learn apinti. Because you already learned to talk." As he went on to explain, knowing "how to talk" went beyond knowing individual phrases in apinti. In addition, one has to be a clear and effective communicator, with the ability to act as a regisseur (as he called it), to direct the course of events happening around you, whether that is in a ritual setting or in casual awasa play. Whereas Sa Maria and Sa Lucia brought attention to the skills an apintiman must have over and beyond what a gaandonman is required to do, Omu Andre stressed their interconnection; as he sees it, awasa becomes an important basis for future learning.

But once a drummer has attained the minimum proficiencies to direct dancers in the course of an awasa *pee* (performance), how might he get beyond *peemi* to *puu*, to borrow from Sa Lucia's useful distinction? How does he go from rote memorization to a more organic relationship to expression and communication? One component of this process has to do with increasing one's vocabulary. This requires soliciting help from more experienced drummers who are willing to impart aspects of this deeply valued and guarded knowledge. Another aspect involves honing your interactive and oratorical capacities—your ability to notice what's going on around you and make apt contributions to it (in other words, how to enact

effective communication in real time).

The *gi futu* exchange plays an important role in relationship to all these aspects of the task—specifically, the ability to notice and respond, to convey new content effectively, and to demonstrate leadership are all components of increasing a drummer's fluency even when semantically based language is not immediately in use. It demonstrates and enforces a drummer's interactive skill and his abilities of social perception. Without demonstrating these capacities, a drummer would be hard pressed to find knowledgeable players who would help him grow his vocabulary or offer extended tutelage. Whereas the *gi futu* is well recognized as a proving ground for dancers to show off their capabilities, it also presents an opportunity for a drummer to demonstrate mature leadership, informed by social as well as aesthetic ideals.

When Omu Andre made his point that awasa teaches drummers how to interact with their community, I immediately thought back to a Kifoko rehearsal I attended in 2009. Omu Eddy had paused rehearsal to make some suggestions to the gaandonman about his playing style, and then elaborated on his point for the benefit of all of us who were there. He noted that a really good gaandonman would play with sensitivity to the talents and inclinations of the dancer; if an older person was dancing, then you play "*saafisaafi*"—at a slow, steady tempo—and you take care to move through the sequence of the dance efficiently, so they won't tire out before their time is up. On the other hand, if you're drumming for someone with a lot of athletic ability and energy, you adjust your playing style so they have more freedom to show off their abilities and stamina. In that way, Omu Eddy observed, noticing and honoring the dancers' needs is an important responsibility of the gaandonman.

It also brought to mind a conversation I had with the talented dancer Meme Fania during a visit to the Maroon settlement Belikampoe, in which she described what qualities are important to her in a gaandonman:

If he [the gaandonman] knows how to play the drum well, then he'll give you so many ideas how you can dance to it—you can find [within yourself] all kinds of dance moves that you didn't even know about.

But sometimes when you go dance, you don't hear a single *futu*. Because, you have so many people out there with whom you can't dance well. When you go, you stand there and your feet are heavy already.¹⁸

For Meme, this ineffable quality of inspiration can make all the difference in the quality of her dancing experience. Taken together, a drummer's receptivity to his community and his ability to bring out the best in other participants help to create a more dynamic interaction, one that is integral to making the transition from reciting to "talking." They also demonstrate the importance of a drummer's social intelligence and maturity.

As our conversation in his living room progressed, Omu Andre told a story of his experience playing awasa gaandoon during the funerary rites of Gaanman Josef Daniel Aboikoni—the Paramount Chief of the Saamaka people, who died in 1989. He described being roused from his sleep, in order to spell another drummer who had played well into the night. As an aside he told me that, if he was playing in his own village among people he knew well, he might have started by playing apinti phrases that celebrate the drumming prowess of his *lo*, his matrilineal line, to announce who is playing the drum.¹⁹ In a sense, that kind of statement can function as a brag, a way of showing off one's strength and affirming the social bonds of an endogenous community. Here, though, as an outsider given the responsibility of playing during an important occasion, the circumstance demanded his humility. He began his drumming by stating that, as a visitor to Saamaka lands, the assembled audience should treat him as though he was a small child; he called on knowledgeable people in the crowd, requesting their help, guidance, and forgiveness should he misspeak or cause offense. Because he chose his words wisely, the next morning an older man engaged him in conversation. The man told him that his mother was Saamaka but his father was an Ndyuka Maroon, like Omu Andre. Having judged Omu Andre to have spoken well in his drumming, this man offered him an apinti proverb that his father had taught him and that he feared wouldn't be remembered. Omu Andre offered this story to me to demonstrate the variety of ways that an awasa gaandoonman can introduce himself to his listening public, but in addition I think it serves to illustrate the importance of a drummer's perspicacity, and how that can facilitate apinti language acquisition.

Apinti has long appeared to be on the verge of extinction. Kenneth Bilby puts the situation in stark relief; his comments relating to the Alukus echo statements I have heard among Ndyuka and Pamaka Maroons throughout the years:

By the 1990s, many younger Alukus seemed resigned to the likelihood that the loss of apinti tongo was imminent. Less than three decades later, it is less clear than ever whether this tradition will survive much longer. The few remaining experts I know of are now approaching old age and, to the best of my knowledge, few if any younger Aluku drummers have received thorough training in this complex form of surrogate speech. (Bilby "Music in Aluku Life," 56.)

Embedded within this issue is a fundamental tension: On the one hand, apinti is deeply respected as a form of communication and a wellspring of Maroon knowledge and power, with profound ties to history, identity, and the spirit world. Many have expressed to me the urgency of the situation—without swift action in the present, this entire realm of knowledge and communication could be lost to them and to future generations. On the other hand, to transmit apinti knowledge haphazardly or to those unprepared for that responsibility could have disastrous consequences.

The use of apinti tongo in awasa performance may be seen by some as circumscribed or peripheral to the social, spiritual, and political duties of a seasoned apintiman, however awasa's perpetuation has real implications for apinti's survival. From a cultural-ecological perspective (Titon "Music and Sustainability"), losing the communicative through-lines in awasa also means losing an important training ground that prepares a drummer for the task of apinti language learning. A gaandoonman must exercise acute observational skills to draw in participants, to guide them successfully through the dance protocols that make up a dancer's "flow," to pay attention to their personal inclinations and talents. Dancers' active participation and dialogue gives immediate feedback as to the effectiveness of his communication. As he employs the full range of a Maroon communicative matrix—including but not limited to *apinti tongo*—a gaandoonman's skill resonates socially, affirming and supporting the community of which he is a part. All of these components play a role in "playing with understanding" and "learning to talk." Awasa's benefit as a supporting practice only comes to light when considering the social and performative aspects of an apintiman's craft; just as apinti is so much more than a specialized vocabulary, an apintiman's skills must extend well beyond the memorization and technical execution of words and phrases on the drum. Given the serious risks involved in drumming apinti, an aspiring drummer must demonstrate patience, social attunement, and a strength of character before he will be trusted with the responsibility of learning apinti in any depth. These are not only qualities that will gain him purchase in his studies, they are perpetually active dimensions of the role of apintiman.

Gi Futu as a Social Script

Gi futu (give foot) is one out of many interactions in the Okanisi language that are conceptualized as being given. Others include giving thanks (gi daa), giving honor or praise (gi gaandi), giving greeting (gi odi), giving story (gi mato).²⁰ All of these exchanges are improvisational in a way, while also following a rough template—a person can begin a morning greeting by saying "we wake" or "we've slept," they may personalize their communication with terms of endearment or familial connection to the other party, but they can't interrupt the cadence of the exchange nor can they diverge radically from the social script while still being recognized as performing their intended social gesture. These "givens" may be initiated by one party, but they all involve exchange between parties: they are collaborative, requiring successive contributions from both the initial speaker and a respondent in order to be socially viable. As an example, here are two such givens, gi daa and gi odi:²¹

Gi Daa / Give thanks

A: Gaantangi fu i yee / Thank you

B: A n'abi daa baa / There's no need for thanks

A: A abi. A bigi tja bigi baa / There is. A big gesture (or a

- big help) carries big gratitude
 B: Da a kenki / Then, it changes (meaning, in the future I will have cause to be grateful to you as well)

Gi Odi / Give greeting (in the afternoon)

- A: [Name of the person or people being addressed], u miti oo / We meet
 B: Iya, u miti yee / Yes, we meet
 A: Da, u de? / Then, we're here [all is well]
 B: U de yee [...] isee fi de / Yes, we're here [yes, we're doing well] [...] Are you yourself here? [Are you doing well?]
 A: Iya u de baa / Yes we're doing well
 B: Eeya / Yes
 A: Hm / [Greeting is concluded]

Both of the above are short examples of what can be lengthy exchanges.

The formal features of these givens help to distinguish them as characteristically Maroon social expressions. For instance, gi odi might be used in the general sense of saying hello, but more specifically it refers to a proper or culturally appropriate way to do so. Especially among younger people and in urban areas, gi odi exchanges are increasingly substituted with a more cursory greeting:

- A: Fa e go? / How's it going? [or] Ofa? / What's up?
 B: Ae go saafisaafi / It's going along, [or] Mi de / I'm here

This latter exchange is effectively a greeting, comprised of words in the Okanisi language, but Maroons who greet one another in such a truncated manner are open to criticism that they don't know how to gi odi—they do not know how to exchange greeting in the respectful, traditional way.²² This example from a verbal interaction emphasizes the broader principle common among the givens I've mentioned: their form and the extended nature of the exchange contribute to their social and cultural resonance.

There are parallels in awasa performance as well. As Omu Andre illustrated earlier, dancers and drummers who forego the opening interactions within awasa and jump right in to the gi futu are likewise criticized for not really knowing how to dance awasa for reasons that have to do with the truncation of form. Within the gi futu section itself, there are additional similarities. Like the above givens, gi futu requires the active participation and input of multiple parties; it is developed in collaboration. It is an extended exchange, with the gaandonman and dancer (or dancers) listening and responding to each other over a period of time. The gaandonman and dancers share a common vocabulary of known futu patterns (much as there are stock phrases used when giving thanks or greeting), but there is ample variety from which to choose, and enough flexibility to accommodate certain kinds of invented or unexpected

input. That said, a performer has to be careful not to stray overly far from social and aesthetic expectations, lest they face ridicule or challenges to their foundational knowledge.

Tresna Pinas, director of the Maroon cultural organization Teke Leli, offers a representative critique of awasa. In an interview with Tolin Alexander, she expressed her disapproval regarding the myriad influences that have infiltrated awasa dancing:

The way that people used to dance awasa earlier on, nowadays the younger dancers don't dance it that way anymore. It's almost like, when you see the young people dancing what they call awasa, then almost you want to ask them what they're dancing. It's *kumanti* or *uman daguwe* or it's a whole other dance. They jump high, hands don't move smoothly, their feet are all over the place ... all kinds of dance that aren't in our culture. Sometimes I wonder which direction our dance is going now. Awasa dancing is lowering through your knees, make graceful movements with your hands, neck, and waist. You see they're dancing *bandámmba* [but they'll tell you] it's awasa; you're seeing that they're dancing *songe*—[they claim] it's awasa; they're jumping [in the style of] *kumanti*—[they claim] it's awasa. But that's *not* awasa. Those nice ways from before, it's that we must hold and pass on to the younger ones. (Alexander "Cottica Territory"; original translation.)

Whereas Omu Andre's critique relates to a truncated form, Tresna Pinas derides the dancers' choreographic content and movement vocabulary. The young dancers she criticizes have incorporated into their gi futu performance styles from other genres, but without retaining enough of the aesthetic and communicative foundation to keep their dancing recognizable as awasa.

To summarize, gi futu may employ rhythmic patterns devoid of any strict semantic meaning, but in light of its connections to other, language-based givens, this interaction might be seen as a social gesture as well as a choreo-rhythmic one. In the case of the other, verbalized givens, social and cultural meaning is not limited to the individual word selection but rather extends to their performance in a social realm. For example, the timing and duration of the interpersonal exchange, or a person's judgement as they improvise in dialogue with predetermined scripts and expectations affect what is communicated. These expressive parameters are likewise at work in gi futu. Furthermore, though gi futu might not appear to operate in a linguistic realm, the futu patterns do constitute a relatively stable vocabulary; they are recognized as distinct entities, calling to mind broadly agreed upon ideas of how those rhythms translate into movement. The futu rhythm-concepts extend beyond the audible components of a dancer's steps to reference un-sounded elements including directionality or hand position. (Omu Andre illustrated this in the opening, as he demonstrated a particular sideways

step associated with the futu, "Giin- ga tji ka tji ka ginjin giin") As such, the sound conjures a fully embodied choreographic idea that is recognized by drummers and dancers alike.

Ideophones and Expressive Style

In fact, the futu patterns appear to function in much the same way that ideophones function within Maroon languages. Linguist Mark Dingemans defines the ideophone as: "A member of an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery" (17-18). He breaks down his definition as follows:

- i. ideophones are MARKED, i.e., they have structural properties that make them stand out from other words
- ii. they are WORDS, i.e., conventionalized lexical items that can be listed and defined
- iii. they DEPICT, i.e., they represent scenes by means of structural resemblances between aspects of form and meaning
- iv. their meanings lie in the broad domain of SENSORY IMAGERY, which covers perceptions of the external world as well as inner sensations and feelings
- v. ideophones form an OPEN LEXICAL CLASS, i.e., a set of lexical items open to new additions. (15)

All six Suriname Maroon dialects contain a variety of ideophones, which are liberally used to flavor and animate speech. In his linguistic research of the Aluku language (closely related to the Okanisi language of the Ndyuka Maroons), ethnomusicologist Kenneth Bilby has catalogued a number of ideophones, noting that many of these are "undoubtedly derived from African languages" ("African Lexical Component" 9). Here are some of my favorites, using Bilby's definitions (14):

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| Gbogbolu: | falling, dropping (and hitting the ground) |
| Kukukuu: | very short |
| Kwalakwala: | clapping of hands |
| Tjakutjaku: | drinking or lapping up water like a dog |
| Vlau: | rapidly moving. |

In speaking them aloud, you may notice how these words evoke texture, weight, movement, and rhythm: their very sounds appear to depict the processes they describe. The kawai ankle rattles that awasa dancers wear enhance this kind of descriptive potential for danced movement. For example, in Omu Andre's description of awasa that began this article, he spoke the syllables "tjotjoo tjotjoo tjotjoo tjotjoo" to describe how a dancer performs the ambulatory step, waka kon. As someone familiar with the steps, I heard in each "tjotjoo" a dancer's heel grazing the ground (tjo) before planting her foot and transferring her weight (tjoo). Omu Andre's uniform sequence of "tjotjoos" depicted the steady alternation of left and

right feet.²³ Beyond the strictly audible elements of the movement, the sound called to my mind the bent knees and straining thigh muscles necessary to maintain a low center of gravity, and the fluid, elongated flourishes of arms and hands that accompany a dancer's forward progress. The syllables provided a sensory immediacy to the experience that the mere name of the step could not provide. In this way, speaking an ideophone (or a dancer's steps) raises a performative opportunity; a speaker's distinctive articulation, choice of speed, number of repetitions, or volume are all effective ways of evoking a more precise idea. These sonic parameters are easily and often manipulated for emphasis and/or comedic effect.

I mean to suggest that the interspersal of directive and descriptive vocabularies and messaging, as is apparent in awasa, is already a prominent and valued component in Maroon interactions; in fact, the liberal use of ideophones in everyday speech is one of the features that gives Maroon interactions their own characteristic flair. It contributes to a joy in wordplay that Sally Price and Richard Price emphasize and elaborate on in their book, *Maroon Arts*:

Even in the broader comparative context of African-American societies (where performative and expressive events play such a central role), Maroons exhibit an unusually keen appreciation of nuance and voice, phrasing, accent, gesture, and posture. Playfulness, creativity, and improvisation permeate conversation, and spontaneously invented elliptical phrases frequently substitute for standard watch—a watch may become a "back-of-the-wrist motor," food "under-the-nose-material," a stool "the rump's rejoicing," swimming "underwater work." ...

This kind of spontaneous expressiveness shades directly into more formally delineated styles of music, dance, and verbal art. The melodic phrase a woman uses to break the monotony of a morning rice cutting may be expanded by a repeated response and sung by a soloist and chorus at the next community-wide celebration in her village. A hunter's humorous description of an agouti he happened upon, washing itself in the forest, is stylized into a dance that is performed to the accompaniment of drums and handclapping. And another man's rendition of the rhythms of a Coca-Cola bottling machine he saw in Paramaribo becomes a popular piece for local drummers. Just as Maroons incorporate into their visual aesthetic framework such features of everyday life as tin lanterns, outboard motors, or different-colored varieties of rice, they enjoy building the sounds, gestures, and language of daily living into their more formal performing arts. (238-239)

The dancers in the Ndyuka village Belikampoe gave me a great

example of how this kind of creativity can manifest in awasa specifically. They explained to me how, when he's among people he knows well, an awasa gaandonman can call a person to come and dance by playing "futu" rhythms that that person especially likes, rather than calling them by family name in apinti, or issuing a more general call for a dancer who will dance either *umanpikinfutu* (the gendered feminine style) or *mannengeefutu* (the masculine style). Julia Bree explained:

(Gaandonman) Da Daa told me when he plays, 'kit-tit grigi, grigi kit-tit grigi, grigi kit-tit grigi' it's me that has it, the "grigi" thing. But maybe he plays, 'tik- girigi tik, girigi tik'—then, this one [gestures to the woman next to her] will understand that it's her. [Meme Fania nods and affirms Julia's statement—"It's her."]²⁴

Guided by the same playful creativity that renders a watch a "back-of-the-wrist motor," the gaandonman Da Daa can forego using the name "Julia Bree," instead summoning her using the phrase "Grigi kit-tit grigi, grigi kit-tit grigi." This communication is inherently intimate and affirming of community, in that it is rooted in the drummer and dancer's collaborative attentions and individual observations: the pleasure of recognition and communication both affirms and enacts a kind of social bond. Julia's example also illustrates how, over time, the improvisational nature of *gi futu* can reveal durable trends, tastes, and identifications in a person's self-expression, and that these can be useful points of reference both within and outside of a performance space. Like ideophones, *gi futu* patterns can be considered an open class; through repetition and circulation, new choreo-rhythmic ideas can eventually enter a broader *futu* lexicon. What may have arisen through improvisation in *gi futu* has generative potential to become a social or stylistic referent further afield, in performances and interactions to come. Among the people of Belikampoe, this *futu* rhythm can now show up earlier in the dance—well before the *gi futu* section—as gaandonman Da Daa summons Julia to the dancing space. Within this formal context, bystanders would recognize this syntactical shift and understand that he is using the *futu* pattern to address an individual. This might portend the pattern's future use in the *gi futu* section that is to come, but they would recognize its communicative function at that point in the dance as a name substitution.

This referential use of *futu* patterns differs from the older, well-established and more spiritually charged lexicon that provides the core of apinti. Nonetheless, it does align with a characteristically Maroon way of speaking that demonstrates conversational fluency. Furthermore, especially given awasa's funerary contexts, it is easy to imagine how, after a well-known dancer dies and enters the realm of the ancestors, a rhythm by which he or she was known might accrue additional historical or spiritual dimensions.

Conclusion

I began this article with Omu Andre's admonishment that *gi futu* only realizes its full meaning relative to the language-based interactions that have gone before; I finished with Julia Bree's example of how a *futu* rhythm can come to function as a word. Whereas Sa Maria and Sa Lucia take care to distinguish the role of gaandonman from an apintiman, Omu Andre makes the case for their interconnection. I've argued for linguistic parallels to *futu* rhythms in "given" exchanges and ideophones, while also emphasizing the extra-linguistic and oratorical aspects of an apintiman's craft. At every turn, the transmission of and adherence to fundamental structures and semantic building blocks appears in dynamic tension with improvised (and at times novel) aspects of inspired expression and communicative play. I don't see these points as contradicting one another. Instead, those very tensions indicate the tremendous range of possibilities and applications at work in awasa, and within a broader Maroon communicative matrix. In order to play with understanding, or to make a socially resonant gesture of whatever sort, one must seek out and honor the interconnections among sensory, interpersonal, spiritual, and linguistic aspects of meaning making.

Alongside the generative possibilities are serious concerns about the future of Maroons' unique traditions and forms of knowledge: Omu Andre explains how *gi futu* loses much of its communicative impact when dancers forego the parts of awasa that typically precede it; I have described the disdain people have expressed as the younger generations default to one-liner greetings rather than the customary *gi odi*; Tresna Pinas voices alarm as dancers integrate various genres into *gi futu* to the point where she no longer recognizes the dance as awasa. These cases have in common a concern for the longevity of processes that tend toward community, and that place value in the measured and deliberate unfolding of time, both in learning and in performance. In light of the readily available communicative shorthands that may *resemble* these longer forms aesthetically or functionally, the threat of cultural loss is compounded by the deeper tragedy that people might not even notice as it happens.

The case of awasa and apinti poses a challenge and a warning to those of us aiming to better understand "drum languages" and choreo-musical interactive dynamics of various sorts. Being specific about *what kinds* of connections musicians and dancers form to and through language helps to clarify the full range of possibilities within a communicative matrix. Taking stock of what's possible in the present may play some small role in helping the longer forms and slower processes remain among this spectrum of possibilities a little longer. In contrast, writing in a descriptive shorthand, or circulating media clips taken out of the context of a musician or dancer's flow can create further obstacles to the time-intensive processes through which drummers and dancers go from *peemi* (from playing) to *puu*—to interpretation.

NOTES

¹ For audio recordings of awasa, see Bilby (2010) and Mosis (date unknown)

² Apinti is the Okanisi spelling and pronunciation; in the Saamakan language it is apinti.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are translated to English from Okanisi by the author.

⁴ Mannengeefutu and umanpikinfutu translate to “man foot” and “woman child foot,” respectively. Both styles emphasize gendered aesthetics: umanpikinfutu emphasizes graceful, sinuous movements of the arms, neck, and torso while maintaining a deep bend in the knees and an arched lower back; in mannengeefutu, a dancer highlights their strength and endurance, varying their stance from a deep crouch to nearly upright. Whereas in umanpikinfutu the heel maintains contact with the ground with each step, in mannengeefutu the dancer stays on the balls of their feet. While there is a general tendency for women to dance umanpikinfutu and men to dance mannengeefutu, a dancer may dance in either style regardless of their gender identity, or inflect one style with elements more commonly associated with the other as suits their personal style or their feeling in the moment. For more on these two styles of dance, see Campbell (“Sounding the Body,” “Personalizing Tradition,” and “Cultural Work”).

⁵ They also demonstrate how shortened audio and video clips or various fusion projects that only draw from gi futu can lead to misunderstandings and false impressions of the dance.

⁶ Relating to West African connections, see Price (“Travels with Tooy” 313), Pakosie (“Apinti Akeema” and “Akan Heritage”). For more on the founding of Suriname Maroon societies, see Mintz and Price. Despite being dramatically out-resourced, the Maroons were so effective in battling the Dutch colonial troops as to prompt a series of peace treaties (with the Ndyukas in 1760, the Saamakas in 1762, and the Matawais in 1767), which (among other stipulations) granted rights to land and quasi-autonomous status.

⁷ These events include the arrival or departure of the Gaanman (the paramount chief), the installation of an important religious or political leader in a community, religious gatherings (*gadu pee*), or to convey important messages between Maroon villages or settlements. For additional information about apinti, see Agerkop, Pakosie “Apinti Akeema”; S. Price and R. Price (257-259), and Price (“Travels with Tooy” 313-319). For recordings of apinti see R. Price and S. Price, Gillis, Lavi Danbwa, Pakosie (“Apinti #1”).

⁸ Declaring that a person can play apinti refers to the language, not the instrument. For this reason, when asking a person if they know how to play a drum of this construction, a drummer might specify they know how to play a specific repertoire of drumming (for instance awasa gaandon), or apinti, thereby clarifying the content of what they would play on the drum, rather than the drum itself.

⁹ Whereas a resonant drum can be muffled to produce a tun sound, a drum with a dull, flat sound would not likely play either the pikin doon or gaan doon part, regardless of pitch. While this tonal configuration holds true for a number of other Maroon dance styles, for instance the songe/agankoi dance (also of Ndyuka/Okanisi origin), there are exceptions. In the Saamaka dance, bandámmba, it is the higher pitched drum that will play the gaan doon part, rather than the lower one. The role of the drum relative to the genre being played determines how a drum would be named, so in the case of bandámmba, the higher pitched instrument would be called gaan doon. Note that bandámmba can be played with other percussive configurations as well (Campbell “Modeling Cultural Adaptability”). Many of the communicative aspects of playing awasa gaan doon hold true of other danced genres, especially songe; I focus on awasa here because of its popularity.

¹⁰ Note that an apintiman’s audience includes spirits as well as humans.

¹¹ Andre Pakosie had advised me that a gaandonman communicates instructions to dancers using kumanti’pinti, but Omu Andre gave several examples of anwanwi phrases that can be used in these interactions as well. According to him, everything that can be said in kumanti’pinti can be delivered in anwanwi, however there are phrases in anwanwi that cannot be put into kumanti’pinti. “That’s how you know anwanwi is the boss” (personal communication, March 5, 2024).

¹² Richard Price calls First-Time “the era of the Old-Time People” and marks the conclusion of that era at around 1800. (“First-Time” 6)

¹³ Omu Andre emphasized that he had learned numerous apinti words and phrases his wife’s grandmother. He was emphatic on this point: “So many things that you forget, that you don’t know anymore...it’s not men that you should ask, it’s the women you should ask. It’s the women who are the keepers/custodians (kiibisama) of Maroon culture.”

¹⁴ The core genres that comprise the gaansamapee are *mato*, *susa*, *songe/agankoi*, and *awasa*, performed in that order.

¹⁵ See Campbell “Personalizing Tradition” (Appendix B, 284-306) for a translation of Omu Andre’s account of the group’s founding.

¹⁶ Personal communication, 11 October 2009.

¹⁷ Music theorist Kofi Agawu describes a similar phenomenon he has witnessed in Ghana. Agawu uses the example of a northern Ewe drummer rendering drummed phrases that originated among the Akan but that were passed down independently of Twi language skills from which those drum patterns derive: “While he can mimic the sound of spoken Twi on his drums, he cannot say anything that has not been said before. He is not able to create new utterances in the Twi language in the way that someone who is competent in a natural language can say new things based on an innate grammatical ability. He can only reproduce previously memorized phrases” (133-134).

¹⁸ Personal communication, December 2021.

¹⁹ *Lo* refers to a broad descent group, whereas *bee* refers to extended family through the matrilineal line.

²⁰ *Mato* is a particular style of rendering folktales that requires the active input of the audience or community. *Mato* typically combines spoken storytelling with song and dance. Other stories are likewise "given" using the term *gi toli*. These have greater variation in their structure and format.

²¹ Owing to my own language proficiencies and my focus on a dance genre of the Ndyuka, my examples here are all taken from the Okanisi language. These kinds of exchanges may differ in content among the various Suriname Maroon groups, but their extended and responsorial qualities remain consistent features. See Goury and Migge for additional commentary and examples.

²² In *Grammaire du Nengee*, co-authors Goury and Migge caution, "To employ these salutations with elders is a sign of ignorance or a lack of respect. However, you can use [this shortened form of greeting] with young people to create a more relaxed interaction" ("Employer ces salutations avec les grandes personnes est un signe d'ignorance ou un manque de respect. Par contre, ces dernières les utilisent avec les jeunes pour créer une situation plus détendue") (55).

²³ This is very clearly depicting a dancer's advance in the more grounded, feminine style of *umanpikinfutu*; in the more masculine *mannengeefutu* style, a dancer maintains a more upright posture. Staying light on his feet, he transfers his weight on each initial step. This rhythm would sound more like, "katjik, katjik, katjik, katjik."

²⁴ Personal communication, December 2021.

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received 1 January 2024

revised 6 March 2024

accepted 6 March 2024