Occasional Essays

The Signifying Crab

Judy Rosenthal
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Michigan–Flint

Domestic slavery in West Africa was practiced differently by different peoples in different historical periods, but it is well known that many domestic slaves married into their “masters’” families and inherited property. It was extremely impolite (and was illegal in some places) to even say that a person was a slave or had been born of slave parents. Through time, some slaves became relatively wealthy, and for all practical purposes their offspring were no different from those of nonslave parents. Today numerous Ewe, who inhabit portions of southeastern Ghana, southern Togo, and southwestern Benin, say that one or more of their great-grandparents was a “bought person.” It is said that these ancestors were bought or captured from peoples living to the north of Eweland and that their Ewe masters professed an admiration for the beauty of the “people of the north,” their music, their clothing, and their gods. Even so, or perhaps precisely because of this admiration, first-generation slaves, no matter how well they were treated, were not considered to be Ewe. This profound difference in identity is said to be bound up with language.

Such extreme ambiguity in legendary relationships between Ewe and their “bought people” (slaves) is brought to the surface in a just-so “signifying crab” story (and here I am signifying on Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s The Signifying Monkey [1988]). The story comes from Anlo country in Ghana’s chunk of Eweland. A version of it is found in Blema Konuwo, Lododowo kple Adaganawo, by R. K. Nutsuako (1977), a book in Ewe of and about Ewe proverbs and expressions. In this yarn, categories of the wild and the tame (“civilized”) are insinuated into “bought people” and “people of the house” categories. It is included in the book as an explanation of the origin of the proverb “The slave understands language, but s/he does not understand ‘the wild crab,’ ” or, translated slightly differently, “The slave understands language, but s/he does not understand signifying expressions.” Instead of “signifying expressions” we might say “deep Ewe,” “local Ewe,” “dialect,” or “vernacular.” Transposing to American culture, we could say, among other things, “street language.” These definitions or translations do
not, of course, all mean the same thing, but the expression translated as "the wild crab" refers to all sorts of language that cannot be readily understood by foreigners, nonlocals, or outsiders, even if they have learned the Ewe language.

In Ewe the proverb goes: "Adoko se Evegbe; mesea ‘adagana’ o." Adoko is a euphemism or polite substitute for the word amefefle, or bought person. Se means "hear" or "understand." Gbe means "word," "voice," or "language." Adagana has come to mean "pig (Latin) Ewe"; that is, language inventions or expressions that may be used to construct an insiders’ group, insulated from outsiders who cannot, even if they understand "regular" Ewe, comprehend what is being said. But adagana is a variation on adangalan, or "wild crab" (da means "wild"; agalan means "crab").

According to Nutsuako (1977:103), the expression comes from an Ewe story from several generations ago (before domestic slavery was abolished) about a man who received a visit from foreigners (amedzrowo). He asked his wife to go out back of the hut, to his crab (agalan) nursery, and catch five crabs to cook for the visitors. She caught four crabs, but the fifth one was too wicked (or "bad," but preferably "wicked" in Ghanaian English) and got away. Its pincers were very long and sharp, unlike those of the tamer crabs. It was a wild crab (adangalan). When she reported this to her husband in the presence of their slave, the latter said that he did not know the difference between wild crabs and other crabs and wanted to go and take a look. Upon beholding the wild crab scrambling to freedom, he exclaimed, "They don’t look any different!" The wife exclaimed in turn, "The slave understands language, but he does not understand 'adangalan.' "

What exactly is the nature of the object of the verb understand in this proverb? What does adangalan mean in context? Does it refer to the expression wild crab? Does it point to the wild crab itself, the actual creature? Perhaps the pronunciation of the words wild crab is what was reputedly beyond the comprehension of the slave-foreigner. Was it the signifier or rather the signified to which the woman was referring? Were there quotation marks around adangalan in this particular original, and if so, what did they mean?

Perhaps the wife was merely speaking about the slave’s inability to differentiate between literal wild crabs and literal tame crabs, or between literal and signifying crabs (of various kinds), or about his ignorance of the meaning of the word adangalan. But was she, at another level, signifying on the wild crab nature of the slave? (Slave nature and wildness can be associated in Ewe culture, sometimes admiringly.) Then again, she might have been implying that the slave didn’t (or didn’t know how to) differentiate between wildness and non-wildness (tameness, "civilized" nature, normalcy, and so forth), or between free persons ("people of the house") and slaves ("bought persons"—amefeffe, adoko). The fact that although wildness and slavery are associated it was the wild crab that got away, whereas tameness, associated with the master group, landed the more civilized crabs in boiling water, may be no mean detail. (And here Lévi-Strauss [1969] would remind us of the equation of "cooked" with
"civilized" in numerous cultures, and of the fact that boiled is the most cooked of all.)

Is it "better" (ethically, ethnically, politically, linguistically, poetically, spiritually, aesthetically, militarily, and so on), while traveling upon (within, across) the borders that constitute the Ewe universe, to differentiate or not to differentiate between wildness and nonwildness, slaves and nonslaves, newcomers and owners of the land, foreign and indigenous groups, bought persons and buying persons, cooked and raw, crabs that get away and those that get eaten? These differentiations are highly charged. The slave was saying that the similarities were more fundamental than the differences; this position gives way to a continuum concept of human nature and cultural difference. The woman was signifying on the slave’s foreignness (and thereby on the visitors’ latent "slave-ness," or proximity, by virtue of their foreignness, to the category of slaves) and on his enslavement and his nonmastery of the finer distinctions in Ewe language and Ewe crabs. In her discourse, the distinctions, which kept certain binary oppositions in order, were more significant than the similarities. She could afford that political and domestic position. (In other circumstances, within the Ewe context, it might be to a slave spirit’s advantage to insist on differentiations rather than similarities, as, for example, when slave spirits are worshiped today within a discourse and a practice of absolute, ravishing otherness between them and the Ewe.) The slave’s refusal to see difference where difference was supposedly palpable for his masters was a signifying on their tendency toward extended nuance, the very sort that may be employed for practices of putting people in assigned places, if not for sheer oppression.

Anlo Ewe emphasize the enormous variety of crab life in their land. There are so many different kinds of crabs that a non-crab expert, or a non-Ewe, might get lost in the profusion of difference and imagine that they (all the crabs and all the people) are somehow alike. Indeed, anyone who has not studied crabs or Ewe and their neighbors might pronounce on likenesses rather than distinctions. They might not notice the difference between wild crabs and tame ones, or between Ewe and Ewe-speaking foreigners.

On the other hand, Ewe people worship the spirits of their forebears’ dead slaves. Some foreign, “wild,” captured and deceased non-Ewe are thus divinized, recreated as vodus (gods). So the wife who let the wild crab get away, due to its wickedly long pincers, and who then signified on the nature of the slave as captive and foreign typically should have acknowledged a tug of admiration (and desire?) for wildness and foreignness at the same time that she differentiated herself from these non-Ewe qualities and underlined the slave’s lack of finesse in Eweness.

The long and strong pincers also signify on the fact that certain slaves became ancestors—usually women, but on occasion men as well. Beware the wild crab who might engender semiwild crabs within the confines of the tame. Some Ewe in Togo maintain surnames (e.g., Donko and Klu) that bespeak their issue from slave parents (or their having been consecrated as slaves to vodus). Given that Ewe go by the names they wish to keep, and that changing official surnames
is relatively unproblematic in Togo, there is no reason to keep these names unless this constant reminder of the family’s and the individual’s historical connection to domestic slavery (or, in the other case, to vodu worship) is desirable.4

The admiration-contempt poles of Ewe relationships to their slaves in times past and now (in the form of worship of slave spirits), and to foreigners in general today, are palpable in proverbs like “The slave understands language; s/he does not understand adagana.” The very name for certain signifying expressions, as distinguished from proverbs (lododowo), is adagana. I would argue that the above proverb is itself an adagana, given that it is something that an Ewe person would say to another Ewe in the presence of a foreigner, to signify on foreignness in such a way as to leave the non-Ewe person perplexed. In this case the wild crab gave its name to the generic signifying expression. It is an example of the entries under the category that it names.

Another adagana which is suspiciously similar (but nonetheless distinguishable) to the legendary original one goes (and this is a Togolese Guin variant), “Yovo se gbe; yovo mese ‘agban gban’ o.” This means, “The white person understands language; s/he does not understand ‘the bowl broke.’ ” “The white person” does not get the break of the sonorous wild crab adangalan but rather the mischievously similar “agban gban” which is only the sound of a bowl breaking. (Agban is also the word for “load” or “headload,” which white people are notoriously ungainly in carrying [and therefore refuse to carry], unlike the slave, in the past.) Indeed very few white persons have ever achieved signifying crab proficiency in Ewe language, the treacherous subtleties of which any unschooled Ewe villager can obviously bandy about with virtuoso brilliance (as is true of native speakers in all languages). Nor do other foreigners—for example, the slave from the north—ever achieve more than middling mastery, if we are to believe the adagana. (The writer hereby establishes the goodness of the company in which she finds herself.)

This story features differences between languages as major points of reference in daily life. In an area where there is a different language or significantly different variant of the same language every 20 to 40 miles, and where numerous individuals speak three or four languages, the uncanny nature of linguistic and cultural difference is both domesticated through a childhood jaded with different tongues and resacralized through ritual. Thus during Gorovodu ceremonies, spirit hosts or “wives” (tronsiwo) speak Twi and Hausa glossolalia. The unbelievable sounds of otherness come from the northern slave spirit’s entrance into the Ewe spirit host’s own inner self (from one’s own “hole” or “stomach” in Ewe). And during Mama Tchamba ceremonies, Kabye glossolalia can be heard, even during the period 1985–94, when Kabye and Ewe peoples had supposedly rekindled the eternal flames of ethnic hatred, according to the government press.5 Onlookers at Mama Tchamba celebrations can be heard to whisper to each other, “Look, she is now a Kabye slave spirit—listen to the Kabye she speaks—see how beautiful she is!” Worshipers in trance are guided into a Vodu hut to be dressed in beautiful costumes typical of northern peoples, and then they come out to the worshiping throng to dance in a state of absolute grace, to
prophesy, and to signify brilliantly or bawdily (or both at the same time) in a mixture of Ewe, Guin, Twi, and languages of the north.

This exoticist admiration for the Others' unthinkable difference is turned toward oneself and one's own people during nonritual moments. "We Ewe speak a mysterious, difficult and beautiful language [gbe]; no one can master it who is not born into it." And those Ewe inhabited by Kabye divinities during trance are not said to master the Kabye language, but rather to be mastered or traversed by it, to have it go through them momentarily and periodically. Their ecstasy in trance springs from a ludic practice of language, an untying of tongues, a tumbling of Kabye (Twi, Hausa, Nago, Tchamba, Mossi, and so forth) words and syllables out of their mouths (stomachs), an unabashed playing with the ultimate Other's speaking organs. Or, these privileged actors might rather say, were they to theorize in this particular fashion, that it is precisely their own speaking organs that are being played with by the language of the slave-divinities, and that they give themselves up to this sacrificial cleaving of their own tongue/body/ hole by these words from the north, these voices of the inconsolably foreign slave, the exquisitely not-oneself.

Notes

Acknowledgments. The adagana materials came to me when I was doing dissertation research, funded by a Fulbright-Hays grant and a Charlotte W. Newcombe fellowship. I would like to thank these two granting agencies as well as Edem of Kodjoviakope, who introduced me to adagana practices, and Barbara Baeten, who helped me cross the border.

1. The author's name in full is Osofo R. K. Nutsuako. The title "Osofo" is employed by both Asante and Ewe to indicate that a person is a Christian minister, a Gorovodu priest, or a religious specialist of another kind.

2. Making the term of dominance the marked one emphasizes the relativity of the dominance, which is as it should be in this consideration of Ewe concepts and relationships.

3. Here we are reminded of Sir Edmund Leach's (1964) famous study of animal categories, wherein the structure of food and kinship terminologies indicate that one cannot marry what one cannot eat, categorically speaking.

4. Mamattah, in his inimitable blurring of Ewe oral history and Seventh-Day Adventist myth, writes the following introduction to the chapter "The Clans of Anlo": "The original twelve clans established by veteran duto venya when the Anlos arrived on Anloland and patterned to correspond with the twelve tribes of Israel are herein enumerated. With the grant of naturalization privileges to aliens and freed slaves, the clans in Anlo have increased to fifteen" (1976:159). Thus were slaves, as well as entire other cultural and linguistic groups, such as the Adan people, given clan identities within the fluid borders of Ewe land, kinship, and culture.

5. This is the situation at present in Togo, where the long-established dictator from the north maintains that the democratic opposition that tries to unseat him is a southern "tribal" conspiracy. There were moments of violent crisis in 1990–94, including clashes between an army composed mostly of northerners, and southern civilians, at the deadly expense of the latter. While the official press decries "tribal conflict and hatred," numerous villages in the south continue to carry out Gorovodu and Mama Tchamba
ceremonies in worship of northern spirits from the very ethnic groups of the dictator-
president and his soldiers. Some of these Vodu communities have been especially
targeted for murderous military interventions, for they are well-known seats of demo-
cratic desire and opposition to dictatorship and its practices of “nepotism writ large,”
or “state tribalism.” These worshipers know in sumptuous detail the difference between
sacred ethnic/linguistic differentiation, and so-called tribal opposition.

References Cited

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr.
1988 The Signifying Monkey; A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism. New
York: Oxford University Press.

Leach, Edmund R.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude

Mamattah, Charles M. K.
1976 The Eves of West Africa; The Anlo-Eves and Their Immediate Neighbours.

Nutsuko, R. K.
1977 Blema Konuwo, Lododowo kple Adaganawo. Accra: Ghana Publishing Cor-
poration.