
Rainforest Warriors is a compelling account of a landmark series of precedents in international adjudication. Richard Price tells the riveting story of courageous petitions by the Suriname Maroons (particularly Saamakas) against the Republic of Suriname for violating their territorial and corporate rights as a self-determining tribal people.¹ This well-documented book draws on Price’s comprehensive grasp of the history, ethnography, and political ecology of Maroons in Suriname and in neighboring French Guiana, where a third of the Saamaka population lives in exile.

Price disproves the Suriname government’s accusation that the expert testimony he contributed to the 1992 and 2007 Inter-American Court of Human Rights hearings is “totally outdated . . . and legally unfounded” (p. 151). Despite being expelled from the country in 1986 (when the six-year civil war started) and denied entry since then, Price’s achievements as a documentarian, analyst, and writer attest to his continuing commitment to ethnographic witnessing and advocacy for Saamakas and other Maroons. Toward these ends, he shifted his fieldwork to French Guiana, where Saamakas, Ndyukas, and other Maroons live as transnationals maintaining ties with their home territories—the source of their spiritual strength and communal identity.

The book begins with the early history of grand marronage in Dutch Guiana (Suriname), the 1762 peace treaty after a century-long guerrilla war, and the ethnogenesis of a culturally distinctive way of life. The story continues in the second half of the twentieth century with the incidents and crises that prompted Maroons to take their fight from the rainforest to the courts. Price sets the historical stage for elucidating Maroon experiences in Suriname and French Guiana, where Maroons have migrated in a circulatory pattern for more than a century.

Key to his analysis is the historical and spiritual ecology that laid the basis for sustainable patterns of subsistence and resource management. He builds much of his argument around the contrast between the Saamakas’

¹ Editors’ note. The people who had been known in the literature as Saramaka recently decided that they wish to be known as Saamaka, corresponding to their own pronunciation. Their decision came too late to be included in the English-language version of this book but it is respected in the French translation of 2012.
ritualized relationship to the environment and the destructive resource exploitation that the state and transnational corporations promote in their relentless pursuit of development at the expense of Maroon and indigenous wellbeing. He also contrasts flagrant, direct human rights violations with more subtle, indirect assaults on human dignity. The Afobaka dam project implemented in the late 1950s and early 1960s is the epitome of the former. It was undertaken without the consent or consultation of the Saamakas, half of whose territory was submerged by the artificial lake. The Saamakas have still not recovered from the massive loss of property and diminished subsistence security.

Price argues that the predicament of Saamaka exiles in French Guiana is characterized by indirect assaults on their human dignity rather than direct assaults on their sovereignty. Despite being relegated to menial work and squalid living conditions, and being denied an official refugee status, they have maintained their dignity. While Price acknowledges that the notion of human dignity undergirds human rights law, he does not examine the status of the servile work and squalid living conditions he describes within that body of law. Indignities of this sort can be interpreted as breaches of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and of other instruments protecting migrants and refugees. However, the social and political life of human rights depends on discursive and politico-legal claims and not just abstract categorizations. As the Saamakas themselves perceive their lived reality and determine which objectives are claimable as rights, assaults on dignity in French Guiana are a lower priority than the sacred rights to territorial property and sovereignty.

The remaining parts the book focus on the cases brought to trial and the circumstances leading up to them. The first two responded to the most brutal incidents during the civil war: the 1987 Aloeboetoe incursion and the 1986 Moiwana village massacre. Petitions submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights eventually led to the court hearings and judgments for Aloeboetoe v Suriname (1993) and Moiwana v Suriname (2005). These cases cleared the ground for The Saramaka People v. Suriname (2007, 2008), which transcended the limits of the earlier judgments by more fully addressing the corporate rights of Maroons as tribal peoples. The case articulated the Saamakas’ grievances against encroachments on their territory in the 1990s. At issue were the government’s granting of concessions to transnational logging companies without prior consultation with or consent from Saamaka authorities; and the environmentally destructive