

Inter-American Court of Human Rights

Twelve Saramaka Clans v. Suriname

Affidavit of George Leidsman

**Submitted by
The Victims' Representatives**

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I. GENERAL

A. Mr. Leidsman, please state your personal details.

1. My name is George Matheus Leidsman. I was born on 6 April 1929 in Ganzee, a village which belongs to the Saramaka tribe. I am married and have 8 children. I went to primary school and I have worked for the government as a civil servant for thirty years. Now I am retired.

B. Does the village where you were born still exist today?

2. No, the village no longer exists. It was flooded in 1964. It was one of the Saramaka villages that was flooded when they built the Afobaka Dam.

II. THE FORCIBLE DISPLACEMENT OF THE SARAKAMA BY THE AFOBAKA DAM

A. Did you experience the displacement of the Saramaka when the Afobaka dam was built?

3. Yes. I was 35 years old when the water flooded my village. I had sent my wife and my children away, but I wanted to see for myself if the water would really come. On 6 June 1964 I stepped out of my house right into the water. I had tears in my eyes. Those who stayed behind watched as the whole village was drowned, and we all wept. Then we had to leave.

¹ Taken from a digital transcript recorded on 16 January and 6 February 2007. The original recording is in Dutch, English and the Saramaka language.

B. Were you informed by the Government about the flooding? Did you know why your village was flooded?

4. Yes, the government told us, and that it was to build a dam that would generate electricity for a bauxite refinery. They told us we would get electricity too, but we had to wait 35 years for that. Now we have electricity, yes, but we had to wait for 35 years. The government told us that they would build a new village. The Districts Commissioner came to our village, but only after we complained that we wanted more information, that was in March 1963, because many people did not believe we would be flooded. The Districts Commissioner told us that it was true, that the village would be flooded and that all the villages would disappear. But he said that they would build a new village, and they would build it in such a way that we would forget our old village.

C. Can you tell us about the way the Government organized the resettlement of your village?

5. I do not think you can say they organized it; there was no organization. So when we noticed that this was going wrong, we set up a committee and I was the chair. In March 1962 the committee was set up in my village and it was to help our people with the organization of the transmigration. On our own we started to count the people. This was after the people had already been moved. We went to all the new villages and we counted the whole families, including the children. There was a report, but I gave it to somebody at the Districts Commissioner's office and she went to Holland and I never got the report back. To this day I regret that I gave it to her, because we did all this work and now it's gone.

D. Was everything from your old village moved to the new place?

6. No, we were not allowed to take anything with us. They said they would build everything anew. They did not even let us move the cemeteries. That is something that is really painful for us, whenever we talk about it, the old people from my village, we still cry.

7. My father died six months before the flooding and he was buried in the cemetery of the village. When we noticed that the water reached the cemetery, I went to look at my father's grave and I went to tell my mother. We cried and we cried, my mother, the children

and grandchildren, because we had to leave him behind under the water. That is what happened to all the people who were transmigrated. We could not take our loved ones with us. We had to leave them behind. Some of the coffins started floating on the lake and we could not even take those because by the time we heard about it, they had sunk again. We didn't have the time to move them, because there was no organization.

E. How long before the villages were flooded were the people moved to the new villages?

8. Some time before the water came, they started to move people. But many people did not want to go, they did not want to leave their houses, their farms, and our ancestral lands behind. Those places meant so much to us and they still mean a lot to us. Some people also did not believe that the water would reach the village. So they waited until the water came.

F. Was your whole community moved to a new village?

9. No. My community was split up. The government wanted us to move to Klaaskreek. But part of my community, including myself, did not want to go there, because the land was not good there, it was not fertile. We felt that we would get into a lot of trouble there. We wanted to move to a place behind our old village, behind Pokigron, where there was thick and healthy forest. There you could live independently and well. You would not need the government to feed you. Because that is what I told the people: the government is not going to take care of us forever. We have to make sure we do not become dependent on them, we need good soil to plant, healthy forests to go hunting.

10. So that is why my village, Ganzee, was split up. A part went to Klaaskreek, but most of us went somewhere else: some went upstream to Jaw Jaw, another part went to Sara Creek and I and others went to Brownsweg. The government did not want us to move to Brownsweg. They wanted us all to go to Klaaskreek. But the soil was infertile at Klaaskreek and we wanted to go to Brownsweg where the soil was better and we did not want to be dependent on the government. So we moved to Brownsweg. But there was nothing there: no housing, no water, no electricity and no food.

G. What was the reaction of the government when you refused to go to Klaaskreek?

11. They were angry. They refused to give us food for three months. I was okay, because I had a job, but there were old people there who had no job, no money and no forest plot, so they had nothing to eat.

12. After three months the government started sending food. But then they stopped again. And that we went to Paramaribo, to protest and to talk to the Prime Minister, Mr. Pengel. Twice we went to Paramaribo. There were no journalists involved because it was strictly forbidden to report on the transmigration, so you will not find anything about this in the newspapers. Mr. Pengel never talked to us. They just sent many policemen and they threatened us.

13. We also filed a law suit (a request for an emergency injunction) against the State. This was in April 1963. We hired the best lawyer, Mr. Bruma, but we lost the case. The reason we lost was that on the day of the hearing someone told our witnesses, the Head captain, the Captains and a woman, to go to a different place, they told them that the hearing was not held at the Court house. We were all waiting at the Court house and then someone went up to the Head Captain and told him to go somewhere else. When it was time for our case, we went looking for him, we could not find him. The judge even gave us an extra 15 minutes, but when the Head Captain did not show up, he ruled that we lost the case.

14. Finally, we occupied a government office at Brokopondo. With 180 men, from all the different transmigrated villages, we occupied the office for 17 days.

15. You know, in the end we did not achieve anything with all our actions. But still I am happy we did it, that we did not sit still about the way they treated us.

H. Did you receive any compensation?

16. Yes, I did. They paid per family. A young couple without children received 4 Surinamese guilders (approximately US\$4.00). Families with children received 12 guilders. My wife and I, with five children, received 12 guilders (approximately \$US12.00).

17. That is what happened to us. They did not treat us right, there was no good organization, it really felt to me like they looked down on us, that in their eyes we were not real people.

III. The Consequences and Effects for the Saramaka of the Forcible Displacement

A. Mr. Leidsman, in your opinion, what effects did the displacement have for the Saramaka people and which of these effects are still noticeable today?

18. First of all we lost our old villages, our homes, the place where we were born, where our parents and grandparents were buried, the place where we were safe and lived well. Do you know what that is like to lose the place where your umbilical is buried, where the umbilical cords of your ancestors for many generations are buried? We still talk about it today, we still cry about it today. It makes us very sad to think of our old village. It is really a source of great sadness.

19. And then we were forced to move us to a place where the land was not good. It was not fertile. And we knew this. We know what is good for us, we are forest people. We know which places are good to cut farms and plant cassava, and which places are not good. They could have moved us to other places that were good, but we did not have the choice. The government decided where they wanted to place us; they treated us like animals, like cows that you can chase around a field. So our village was split up. Part went to Klaaskreek, and another part to Brownsveg. There are also people who went to the Upper Suriname River because they wanted to live where the Saramaka can be safe and live free (see Map in Annex A). So, many, many families were split up, our families and our way of living together on the land and with each other were destroyed.

20. Many people who were resettled moved to the city because they did not know how to live in the places that we were moved to. Many of them did not have education so they could not find a job; that is why you now hear all about Maroon criminals. They are from the group that came to town to find a better future. It is especially the young people, they are frustrated, so they end up with these problems, they become involved in drugs and they become criminals. They do not listen to the elders anymore. When the village got split up, there was

no respect for the leaders anymore; our culture was destroyed and this affects all of us now and will also affect our children and our grandchildren.

21. A change that happened because of the resettlement – something that I noticed more and more as the years passed – is that we, those who were displaced and who were forced to live in Brokopondo District, lost much of our collective way of life. In the old village, we had a collective way of living. For example, when cutting a new plot or building a new house, other people would come to help out, or when I went hunting as a young man, I had to give the elderly some of my catch. It really was a requirement. But everything changed after the relocation. Now you have pay for everything. The young people do not help out unless you pay. This does not happen on the Upper Suriname River where Saramaka people and culture are strong, so I know that this is because of what happened with the dam.

22. There are very few young people in the Brokopondo resettlement villages; it is really mostly old people like myself who live there now. For those who get old age pension it is a little bit better because they receive some money. For the others, who have not reached the retirement age yet, it is very hard. There is no employment in the transmigration villages. You have to live from the land, but the land is not good, the soil is not fit for agriculture, so there is not enough food. That is why the people move to Paramaribo.

23. The only good thing is that we have electricity now. But that was just installed recently, less than 6 years ago. They promised us that we would have electricity, but we had to wait for more than 35 years. And you do not get it for free. You have to buy the materials yourself. The old people who get their pension save up for this, so quite a few people have electricity now.

24. I am sure that if we had stayed, or if we had moved to a place of our own choice, we would have been able to guide and support our youth, to prevent them ending up in criminal spheres or living in a lonely way. But there was no adequate support from the government, there was no employment, the soil was infertile, so many people left Klaaskreek. They went to Paramaribo in search of a better life. And now you see what happened, you read the reports in the newspaper. So many of these youngsters have ended up as criminals. Many of our people live in the ghettos of Paramaribo. These places are full of rats and diseases, diseases

that kill their bodies and their minds. Other people spit at us and treat us as like dogs. Our young people did not find a better life there.

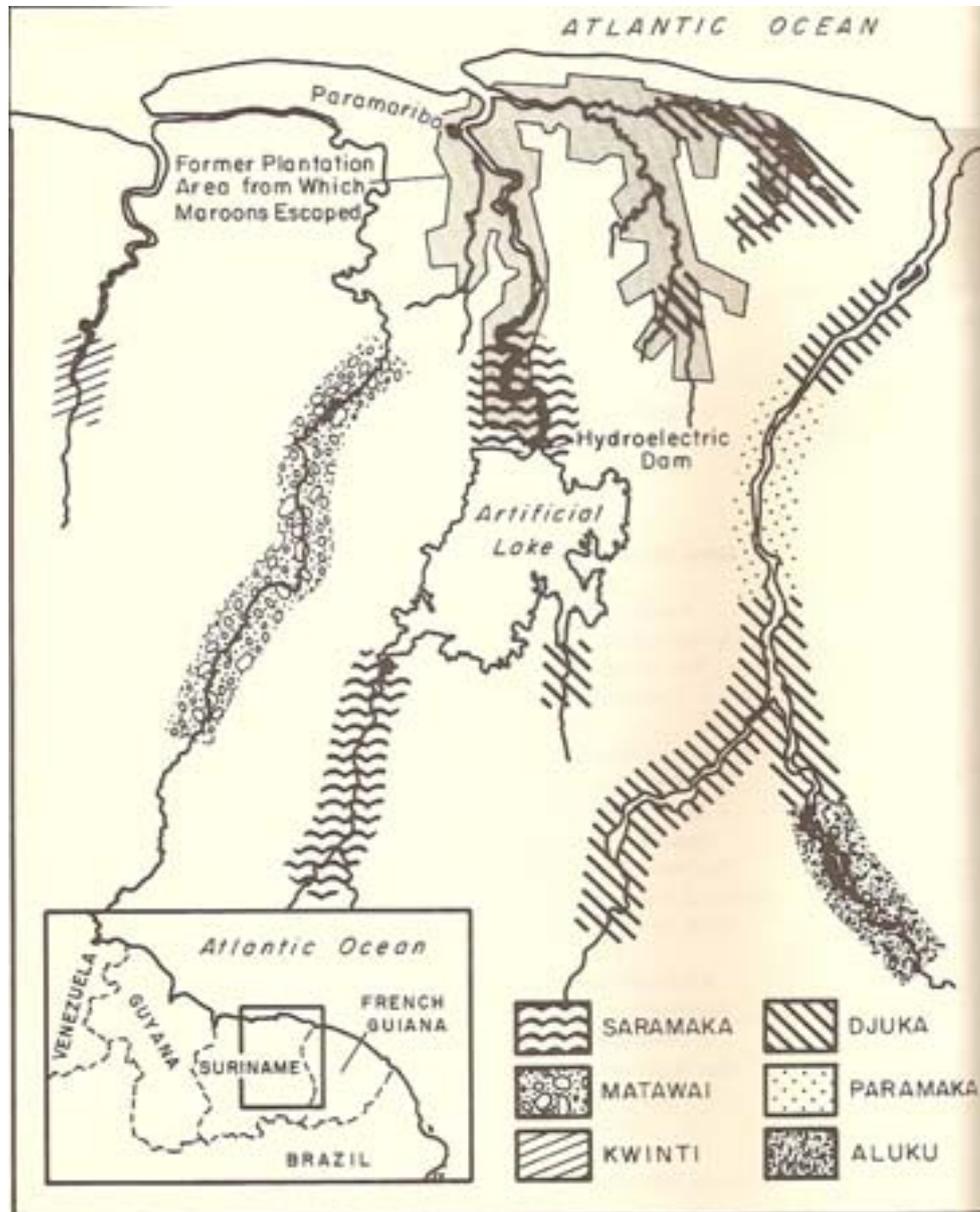
25. Whenever we get together, at funerals or other gatherings, we, the people from Ganzee, we always talk about this. We talk about old Ganzee, and what we had to leave behind in order for us to become practically like beggars today. We cry because it hurts us very much.

Signed on this the 30th day of April 2007,

Mr. George M. Leidsman

IV. ANNEXES

A. Map showing area flooded by Afobaka dam and the location of displaced Saramaka communities to the north of the dam²



The Saramaka and other Suriname Maroons

The Saramaka are now one of six Maroon (or "Bush Negro") tribes in Suriname that together constitute more than 10 percent of the national population. During the 1960s, approximately half of traditional Saramaka territory was flooded in order to produce cheap electricity for Alcoa's new smelter near the capital. Six thousand people were forced to leave their homelands, some settling in special "transmigration villages" to the north of the lake, others establishing villages near its southern border. (The English word *maroon* derives from the Spanish *cimarrón*, a term originally used in Hispaniola to refer to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills; by the early 1500s, it had come to be used in plantation colonies throughout the Americas to designate slaves who successfully escaped from captivity.)

² R. Price, *First-Time. The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1983.