

BOOK REVIEW: *Rainforest Warriors – Human Rights on Trial*

Rachel Kaufer, Webster University – Saint Louis

In *Rainforest Warriors: Human Rights on Trial*, Richard Price provides an intimate look at the struggle for the rights of indigenous people in the Republic of Suriname. Suriname is located in northeastern South America, and the Saramaka Maroons are an indigenous group that has treasured the precious rainforest for more than 300 years. Price gives excellent historic ethnographic documentation to show how the Saramaka fought for their rights, which were being violated by their own government. In 2007, the Saramaka took the government of Suriname to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights after the United Nations flagged Suriname for its mistreatment of the indigenous.

Rainforest Warriors is composed of three main parts. The first is the significant history of the Saramakas and how they came to exist as an indigenous group. The second part of the book discusses the incredible abuse the Saramakas endured, starting in the 1950s and unfortunately continuing to present day. In the third section of the book (my favorite part), Price outlines the legal processes that took place when the Saramakas finally got the attention of the international human rights community and took the Suriname government to Court. I strongly recommend reading the book purely for the climactic insider look into a historic court case.

The historical background of the Saramakas is incredibly important for understanding their beliefs and values as an indigenous group, and Price also does an excellent job of outlining the more

significant events that made Suriname the country it is today. The English colonists first brought African slaves over to Suriname in 1651, and by the end of century 8,000 African slaves were working for 800 Europeans. However, as the seventeenth century began and progressed, Africans started escaping to the surrounding forest. This is essentially how the Saramakas started, and they became experts at creating secret villages shrouded by the unforgiving rainforest. By the 1740s, the Europeans found themselves losing money due to their lost slaves and the expenses of (often fruitlessly) searching for them. After several bloody battles between the colonial armies and the Saramakas, a peace treaty was finally established.

The Peace Treaty of 1762 is of utmost importance to the Saramakas, and its implications have impacted Suriname for hundreds of years. The treaty – sealed by the two parties drinking each other’s blood mixed with wine – initially made both the Europeans and the Saramakas happy. The treaty “granted [the Saramakas] their freedom ... recognized their territory, recognized their political leaders, permitted large groups of their men to come to the coast with timber and other good for trade, and granted them annual or biannual tribute from the whites” (Price, 8). In the eyes of the Saramakas especially, the treaty was viewed as a victory after a century of fighting. Today, this treaty continues to be considered a sacred document that grants them rights to their land. It was this very peace treaty that laid the groundwork for future legal battles between the state of Suriname and the peoples of Saramaka.

I have to commend Price on his story-telling ability, especially when it came to describing the atrocities that the Saramaka went through. There is a significant amount of legal jargon central to understanding the loopholes the government went through, but Price manages to keep it interesting. It reads honestly more like a movie script – where the big evil corporation is horribly exploiting the indigenous – rather than a complicated abuse of the law. What happened to the Saramaka was, and still

is, an atrocity. The horrors they suffered included a dam built in the middle of their land without their consent (which flooded many of their villages, forcing hundreds of families to relocate), Chinese logging companies coming into their land to brutally clear-cut the precious trees and pollute the surrounding wildlife (with of course no monetary compensation to the Saramaka), the prospect of giving away a large chunk of their land to an eco-tourism nature reserve (again without any consent from the Saramaka), brutal violence towards the Saramaka people with no attempt at justice, and a blatant lack of communication by the government that left the Saramaka politically powerless and without significant tools for development on their own. I strongly recommend giving this book a read because of Price's interesting and emotional account on a tale to achieve self-determination.

All of Price's storytelling leads way to an understandable account of how all of the Saramakas unfair treatment actually constituted modern human rights abuses. All of the aforementioned actions were all committed by the Suriname government. One member of the Saramaka lamented that the state doesn't "regard us as human beings. They think we are animals. If someone told you that the government treats us with respect, you would know they were lying" (Price, 162). The Saramaka were just appalled that the government was doing what they wanted with the land; after all, the Saramaka had a binding treaty that had been in place for 300 years stating that they owned parts of the rainforest. However, even if there hadn't been a peace treaty which granted land rights to the Saramaka, they are still protected as an indigenous group under the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This Declaration, which was adopted in 2007, has several specific articles that relate directly to what the Saramaka went through. Perhaps the most telling are Articles 3 and 4, which respectively state: "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" and "Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for

financing their autonomous functions.”¹ The *Saramaka People v. Suriname* trial was of utmost importance for the international human rights community. It was one of the first cases that questioned if an indigenous group really had legal standing to their land, as well as to their own means of development.

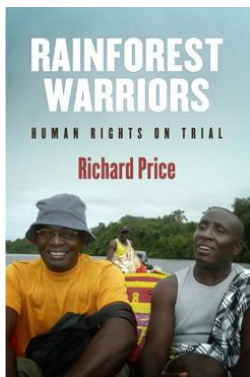
My favorite part of the book was when Price detailed events at the 2007 Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Various representatives from the state of Suriname, important tribe members from the Saramaka community, and experts in the field of Saramaka culture and tradition gathered in Costa Rica for the *Saramaka People v. Suriname* hearings. Price was a witness at the trial; his testimony demonstrated the intricate and intimate relationship that the Saramaka have with their surrounding environment. Price tried to prove to the court that the Saramaka suffered spiritual, emotional, and (of course) economic abuses. The rainforest was not only a place of worship, but also the source of their livelihood. Price did an excellent job of showing just how careful the Saramaka are to preserve the forest for future generations. In the book, Price integrates clips from the courtroom recordings, including when witnesses representing the State are cross-examined, and an overwhelming feeling of rooting for the “good guys” takes over as you read. The various state representatives fumble for answers to questions regarding the treatment of the Saramakas, and it is rather clear that they are incapable of making a decent case; they rely on their claimed ignorance of the Saramaka’s abuse. It is this part of the book that Price triumphs; the reader is treated to an exciting case where the underdogs take on their abuser.

The ruling of *Sakamaka People v. Suriname* was one of great importance in the international human rights community, particularly in the field of indigenous rights. Price offers the opinion that the ruling was monumental in the human rights world because it was the first time where “the Court addressed a people’s corporate (collective) rights, instead of viewing them merely as an aggregation of

¹ To view the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, see http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf.

individuals or as a community/village ... the Court established the Saramaka peoples' right to recognition as a corporate legal identity" (p. 235). The court's decision meant that the Saramaka had legal standing against Suriname. Although the court's decision was not perfect nor was the state of Suriname suddenly fair to the Saramaka, I urge people to read the book and determine their own opinion on whether the court was just in its ruling – and whether the state upheld the demands the court made.

As a celebrated anthropologist, Price is successful in writing an important book based on the not-so-uncommon problem of indigenous rights abuses. He beautifully discusses several themes: the importance of the connection between the environment and the Saramaka, the general disregard for rights and the degrading behavior exhibited by the state of Suriname, and a rather exciting "David and Goliath" tale in which the underdog Saramaka people were successful in demanding that their state treat them with respect as citizens and as rainforest dwellers. Not only is the book a good story, but it is also very educational in regard to indigenous rights. *Rainforest Warriors* is, in the end, an uplifting read in which the people of Saramaka were able to maintain and hold on to their traditional identity in the modern state of Suriname.



Book Information

Rainforest Warriors: Human Rights on Trial

Richard Price (2012)

280 pp., University of Pennsylvania Press, \$27.50

© Copyright 2013 *Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights*. All rights reserved.

Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights is a peer-reviewed academic journal that provides space for undergraduate students to explore human rights issues, challenge current actions and frameworks, and engage in problem-solving aimed at tackling some of the world's most pressing issues. This open-access journal is available online at www.webster.edu/rightingwrongs.