

Saamaka Resilience: Amidst Environmental and Cultural Destruction

This paper examines how Saamaka maroons, both Moravians and not, have resisted and remembered attempts at ecocide that have destroyed their ancestral lands and threatened their autonomy and cultural heritage. Saamaka Moravians lost their beloved church at Ganzee with the construction of the Afobaka dam by the Suriname Aluminum Company (Suralco) between 1961 to 1964. This megaproject displaced thousands of maroons, mostly Saamaka. This presentation focuses on the sites lost and how Saamaka commemorate the lost Moravian church and village, as well as traditional spiritual sites, and how they continue to resist the pressures of extractive industries including with the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

What do you do with a world heritage site submerged and lost? Saamaka Moravians lost their beloved church at Ganzee with the construction of the Afobaka dam by the Suriname Aluminum Company (Suralco) between 1961 to 1964. This megaproject displaced thousands of maroons, mostly Saamaka. According to a [World Bank report](#),¹ the Afobaka Dam inundated about 160,000 hectares of tropical rainforest as well as maroon villages including Ganzee, drowning it and its church, while providing relatively little electric generating capacity (only 30 megawatts). For comparison, the Grand Coulee Dam in the United States displaced as many people for the production of 7 Gigawatts of electricity, over 200 times the amount of power produced at [Afobaka](#).² 5000 people had to be relocated, mostly Saamaka maroons, and almost half of them were inhabitants of the village of Ganzee. The displaced Saamaka were forced into transmigration villages lacking in resources or moved their villages up river. Others crowded into other villages—causing conflicts over land. This presentation focuses on the memory of the lost Moravian church and village including material culture such as *angisas* (women's traditional headkerchiefs) commemorating the environmental catastrophe for many Saamaka. As Christine van Russel-Henar explains, the kerchief called “20 Years Transmigration” was issued by the Moravian congregation of Ganzee in 1984 to commemorate the village's drowning in 1964 (116). The Moravian church had started

¹ “Ledec, George; Quintero, Juan David. 2003. Good Dams and Bad Dams : Environmental Criteria for Site Selection of Hydroelectric Projects. Latin America and Caribbean Region Sustainable Development working paper series;no.

16. © <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/20226> License: [CC BY 3.0 IGO](#).”

² Jobin, William. “Prediction of health hazards in tropical reservoirs and evaluation of lowcost methods for disease prevention.” UNHYDRO2004 Beijing https://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/sdissues/energy/op/hydro_jobin_english.pdf

this village in 1848 and it became one of the largest Christian villages in the interior. Likewise, 20 years later, there was another *angisa* called “Transmigration 40 years” which was issued by the Moravian congregation of the Koffiekamp village in 2004 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of transmigration. As such, both of these *angisas*, made of cloth, commemorated a particular traumatic episode for many Saamaka that resulted in environmental catastrophe and the loss of their communities. This remembrance by Saamaka Moravian women is a way through which they remember the land lost, but also their resilience. As such, this paper examines both commemoration of a lost church and village, but also possible avenues for commemoration.

Biographical note:

Giovanna Montenegro, PhD, is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Binghamton University. She is author of [*German Conquistadors in Venezuela: The Welsers' Colony. Racialized Capitalism, and Cultural Memory*](#) and is working on a book project tentatively titled *Subverting Colonial Fantasies: Maroon and Indigenous Environmental Resistance in Suriname and the Guianas*.