

Letter of an Akawaio Elder to the President of Guyana, Mr L.F.S. Burnham.

An Akawaio elder dictated a letter that was sent to the late Mr LFS Burnham. The elder made a very desperate plea to be heard on the proposed hydroelectric project - The Upper Mazuruni Hydroelectric Project in Guyana. The letter is taken from the Survival International Document VI, Titled: The Damned –The Plight of the Akawaio Indians of Guyana, Authored: Gordon Bennett, Dr Audrey Colson, and Stuart Wavell. The paper was presented during the symposium “Amazonia Extinction or Survival? The Impact of National Development on the Native Peoples of tropical South America.” held at the University of Wisconsin, USA on April 18-22, 1978.

The letter is now being quoted verbatim:

Upper Mazaruni River
5th of Sept. 1976

His Excellency The President of the
Republic,
Guyana House,
Georgetown.

Dear Comrade President,

I am an old man and cannot write; this my letter is written for you by a young comrade as I have told it to him.

It is well known here that it is hard for the chief men of our country to make journey to see us in our distant villages. Thus I wish to tell you how I feel about this water coming to cover our lands for Hydropower. I take you as my father and the father of all the villages in Guyana. You we must tell things that are distress to us so you can know to help us find again for our children the happiness we had before.

Two things I heard, but I believe now they are not true. Long years past it was said we would have to fight to keep our lands. When I did not understand, but now I partly understand that Abel received Alleluia from God, and he told us it is an evil to fight and kill one another for we are all brothers. Only now I try to fight in a different way by writing this letter to you. It is my work to tell you how we are living in these lands that God has given to us, and to ask that we can keep the ways the old people taught us.

The other thing, it was lately a story that is not for hydropower but to give our lands to other people, that we must move from villages. I now understand good that you tried to find some other places for Hydropower but it is only on this side in our district that it can be done. We are the people who have been put here along time ago, and it is distress to you to tell us that our farms and our hunting grounds and our homes must all be made in new places, yet you know this thing is hard for us, and so you will think what you can do to help us.

My father and his father told me that our people used to be many and we had to move before like this time, from coast lands and leave our lands there for other people. The names of places tell you that it was all about the plenty Akawaios used to live. Now to find a place to live quietly in our ways they came back to these mountains where we belong. We are left few only, who were a great nation and there is no other places for us. This is the land and the sky and the air that make us the people of the Upper Mazaruni, you know this true. It is not that we can fool you.

Many of the old people who did not come back up this side, remained among the other men who came to find the diamonds. They die out with new sickness. They lose the language and the way of living good and we do not see them anymore. Thus we want to stay quiet in our own place and see our children happy and strong to keep what God gave us.

I do not like it that teachers tell children it is best to get more money, get diamonds and gold, get job. I want to tell you that the Alleluia has been given to our people as the ways to pray and we know God taught this to us, to bring us out of evil and show how to live in peace and happiness. I do not find the men with money are able to do this better. I have built my house on the earth and our naked feet have made the earth hard as we dance Alleluia. I kneel on the earth to pray. For God made it good and I am not ashamed. I cut farm and plant on the earth, and it is good that so many things I need come from the earth, and if I am sick the other people will give so that we are not hungry. Now I am old to hunt but my sons and sons in laws go to hunt for me. My wife and I go to fish with our wood skins and some small grandchildren. We do not kill unless we need to eat and we are able to have enough to share with some friends coming to stay with us. We are happy this way which God showed to us. We are asking you not to tell our children to forget it. Yes, there are good things also which are new. And I am glad for plastic barrel for cassiri and medicine at the hospital and blanket to keep out the cold, but Abel told that we must not lose the good things that we have had long from God, and not let people fool us who are coming to take away those things.

I am afraid that if we have to move some far place or among other people who do not live this way, what we have believed and learned here would perhaps fade away. I see a plant grows in a place where it can be strong and good. If I pull it us, carry it some other place it may not grow well. Sometimes it will die. So God let us find places to build our houses and cut farms on the Upper Mazaruni where we belong. It is true we may not find land so good as before, but I am asking you to help us stay where we belong. We have learned to move about freely quite often and this way the bush grows back afterwards and the land is still good for children and grandchildren will have. If they are plenty they will not find enough if the place is small. I am saying that this is where we belong. If it is only rocks that are left for us, we will learn from God how to live happy on the rocks. But do not take away what is left when the water comes. It is the place of our people and we will care it well fro you and the country of Guyana. Before I die I would like to know that you will not take it away. If the hill where my lived may become an island it will still be the place where I was born and he was buried. Let my children build how they wish. They are not stupid and know what is good for them. They will learn new things and you will be glad to see it. But the way of living in these mountains is a thing we learned from the land. Someday your children could learn it also from my grandchildren, if you help us not to lose it. I would not be here any more, but it is my mind that God would be glad to see it. Then the land He gave us would be glad and all Guyana peoples happy as a family should be.

I don't feel to have my name written here for I am afraid about some stories I do not understand. It is no harm to write instead.

Yours co-operatively,
Comrade _____

The letter ended there.

The letter effectively outlined the importance of the area to their cultural and economic survival. It shows how they are tied to the land for all their needs; and the interdependence between the people and the land is recognised, as is their willingness to care for the land. He foresaw the

changing value system (e.g. gross materialism, cultural decay, undesirable mores, etc) destroying their people.

Unfortunately, the elder Akawaio was too afraid to give his name to the document. What were the stories being referred to that made him so afraid? Was it the treatment meted out to the Amerindians during and post 'Rupununi Uprising' in 1969?

I was generously given a copy of the paper from which the above letter is taken from Survival International - document VI, presented at the 'Amazonia Extinction or Survival? The Impact Of national development on the Natives Peoples of Tropical South America' Held at the University of Wisconsin, USA, April 18-22, 1978. At this symposium, a resolution was passed:

“WE CONDEMN the Upper Mazaruni hydroelectric project, the implementation of which would constitute an act of ethnocide and ecocide against the Akawaio Nation whose homeland would be flooded by it and whose integrity would be destroyed. We call upon the Guyanese Government to adopt one of the alternatives already recommended by International bodies. We urge all Governments, consortiums and business enterprises to recognise the irrevocable social and ecological damage which would result from this project, and to refuse any form of aid or participation.

We give our support to the great majority of Akawaio who repeatedly stated that they do not wish their lands to be flooded, to be invaded by others, or to be forced to abandon those rights and privileges over their lands which they possessed from time immemorial.”

The article was submitted by the writer to inform the Guyanese people, in particular, of the threats to their cultural heritage. The loss of such a rich cultural heritage is unimaginable and must never be allowed to occur.

Seelochan Beharry

22nd Nov., 2006