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## STATEMENT BY GAANMAN GAZON MATODJA, PARAMOUNT CHIEF OF THE NDJUKA (AUKANER) PEOPLE

*Transcribed and Translated from Ndjuka by Kenneth Bilby*

So. The person speaking here today, on the 26th of March, is Gaanman Gazon Matodja of Diitabiki. Today he will speak to the people of the United States. Well, I can declare to the people of the United States that the person who occupied this post before me was Gaanman Akoontu Velanti of Diitabiki. It was his office, and now I am sitting in his place to carry on the work. By my count, this elder, Gaanman Akoontu Velanti, occupied this office for 14 years before he passed away. When Gaanman Akoontu Velanti died, I took over his office to keep his place for him. I have been in this office, I believe, for 26 years. So I state.

Well, I oversee the area from the Cottica River all the way to Gaan Boli. We call it the Tapanahony. The Tapanahony River is the Ndjuka River. All the people within this region are under my authority, from the Cottica River, through to the Com-mewijne River, continuing along the river, all the way to Gaan Boli. Those are the people who operate under my authority. We call this river the Tapanahony. Those going by the name Aukaner (Okanisi) people, Tapanahony Aukaner people — they are under Gaanman Gazon's authority.

The way paramount chiefs governed in the past used to be different. The chiefs and under-officers in this region received no pay in the past. But they and the paramount chief stood together. Whenever anything happened in the area, the paramount chief would put them in charge. If somebody was stealing, the person might be whipped. And if someone wronged someone else, the person might be whipped. When a transgression occurred, the chiefs and under-officers would throw their support behind the paramount chief. They used to work hard, without pay, those chiefs and under-officers of the area — they were the government of the region.

But nowadays, although the *Kabiteni* (village chiefs) who are put in office and the *Basia* (under-officers) take care of their own villages — when you take a good look — you see that their work is no longer done as it used to be in the past. Their work no longer gets done precisely as it should. In other

words, things in my territory no longer work as well as I would like.

In the past, when someone had a disagreement with someone else in the Ndjuka area — let's say they fought — then they would fight with their fists. They would fight with their fists. There were certain matters that I as *Gaanman* (Paramount Chief) would concern myself with directly. But if I sent the *Kabiteni* and the *Basia*, then they would go and debate the case [in the context of a *kuutu*, a council meeting]. Whoever was in the right, they would decide in his favor; whoever was in the wrong, they would decide against him.

And if someone went too far, fighting another person with his fists in a way that wasn't right — if he fought at night, or fought in the water — then they would impose a penalty on him: perhaps he'd have to dig out a large boat, or he'd have to clear a garden in virgin forest, or he'd have to pay a fine of one demijohn worth of rum. That's how our law used to be, here in the forest.

But now, for those born in recent times, life has changed totally. They are adopting the city way of life. When people have a disagreement nowadays, then they grab a machete or a knife. They've adopted the ways of Paramaribo [the capital of Suriname]. But that was not the way in the forest. This shocks us... taking a gun to shoot someone else!...

So all these things, they never used to exist in the forest. It's something new that I've encountered in my work, which I don't like. But one can do nothing about it by oneself. When those kinds of things happen, they are matters for the police. The police must handle those things. I can't take care of those things by myself.

The *Kabiteni* of today no longer have the strength of those who used to govern in the past. They're afraid of the public. The public is stronger than they are.

Okay, we'll stop there. I'll say no more for now. What remains to be said we will hear about later. Okay.

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*Gaanman Gazon Matodja has been Paramount Chief of the Ndjuka Maroons of Suriname since 1966. In 1970, as part of an official delegation of Surinamese Maroon Paramount Chiefs, he became one of the first Surinamese Maroons to visit Africa. His attendance at this year's Festival will be his second visit to the United States.*