

# Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Culture in the Americas

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In 1739, more than 40 years before the United States won its war of independence with Britain, the British government, then among the most powerful in the world, concluded two peace treaties on the island of Jamaica. Those with whom the British treated were neither European generals nor Native American chieftains. They were, rather, enslaved Africans who had managed to escape plantations and form new societies in the wilderness. For nearly a century, these escaped slaves had waged a devastating war against the colonists from their strongholds in the Jamaican hills. Unable to defeat them, the British were forced to propose treaties recognizing the freedom that their former slaves had already seized, and granting them land and partial political autonomy.

The Jamaican treaties were not the first of their kind. Similar pacts had been made, for example, between colonial governments and communities of escaped slaves in Hispaniola, Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador during the 16th century and in Mexico, Colombia and Brazil during the 17th century. Yet other treaties were to follow the Jamaican ones, such as those made in Dutch Guiana during the 18th century.

The story of the maroons — as those who fled from bondage and their descendants became known — does not begin with these colonial treaties, but goes back to the very earliest days of European settlement and slavery in the Americas. In 1502, a mere 10 years after Columbus' first voyage, the first known African

maroon escaped his captors and fled into the interior of the island of Hispaniola. No one can say with certainty when the first maroon community in the Americas was established, although there exists a written document confirming that by the early 1500s a settlement of escaped African slaves had already formed on Samaná, an island off the northeastern coast of Hispaniola (Price 1979: 419).

Over the next three and a half centuries, hundreds more such maroon communities were to emerge throughout the Americas, as slaves took their chances and broke away from the mines and plantations of the European colonizers in a bid for freedom and independence. Their exact numbers will never be known. The societies they created ranged in size from small bands of 10 or 20 people to powerful kingdoms with thousands of members, such as Palmares in Brazil, which spanned more than 1,000 square miles.

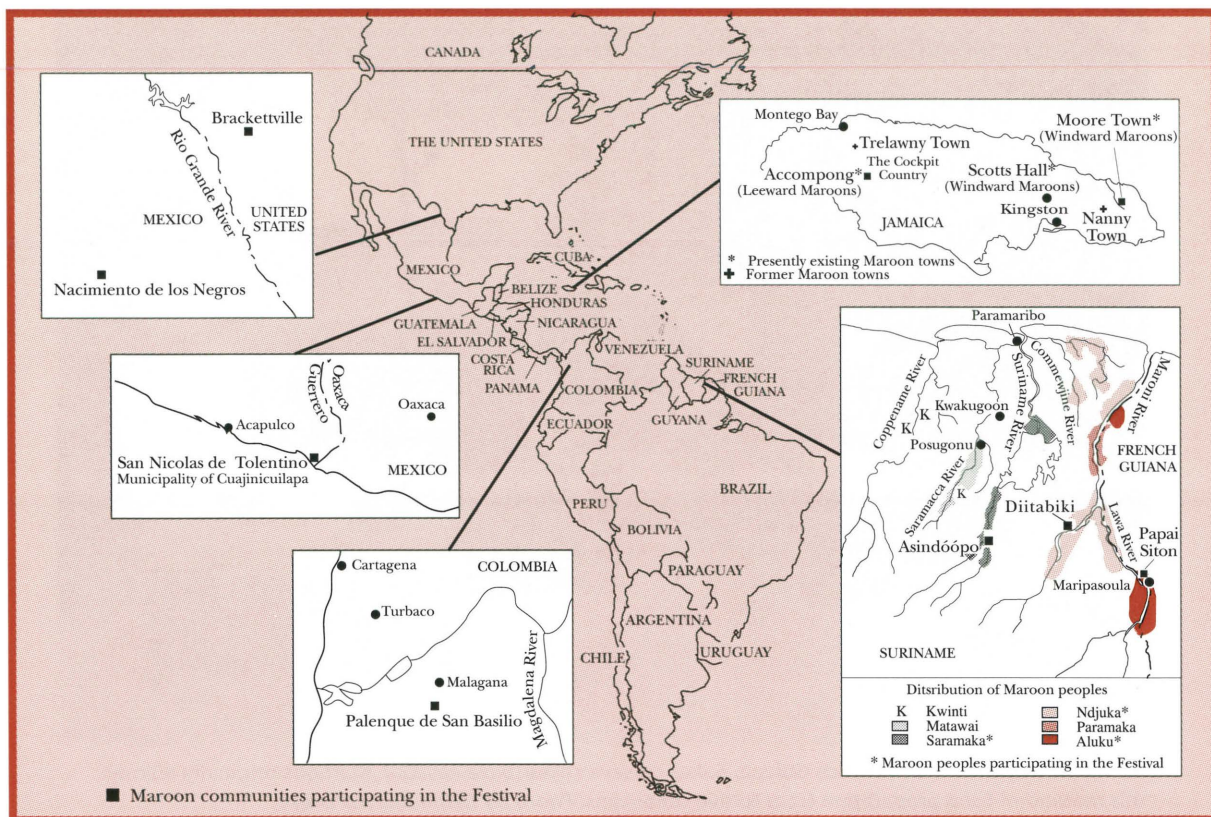
No colony in the Western Hemisphere, no slaveholding area, was immune to the growth of such alternative maroon societies. Wherever large expanses of inaccessible and uninhabited terrain permitted, as in the vast Guianese rainforest or the mountainous Jamaican interior, these communities proliferated. Even in the British North American colonies, and later the United States, where unoccupied yet habitable spaces were not as plentiful, more than 50 maroon settlements are known to have come into being between 1672 and 1864. We have no way of estimating how many others may have escaped the notice of historians.

In many ways the maroon experience is emblematic of broader processes that helped shape the Western Hemisphere. Not only were maroons in the forefront of resistance to slavery, they were among the first pioneers to explore and adapt to the more remote, unsettled spaces

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in both American continents and the Caribbean. Maroons were among the first Americans in the wake of 1492 to resist colonial domination, striving for independence, forging new cultures and identities, and developing solidarity out of diversity — processes which only later took place, on a much larger scale, in emerging nation-states. In the French colony of Saint-Domingue, maroons helped to launch the Haitian Revolution, which gave birth to one of the first independent republics in the Americas in 1804.

Although there is a large and growing body of scholarly writing about maroons based on solid archival research, relatively few people

today are aware that such communities ever existed. Few history books used in schools in the United States give attention to the societies and cultures that maroons successfully built away from the plantations. It is thus particularly appropriate in this Colombian Quincentenary year to celebrate the histories and cultures of maroons, whose heritage of creativity and resistance has been so much a part of the post-Columbian American landscape.

### Contemporary Maroons

Although many withstood military assaults for years, most maroon communities were eventually destroyed by colonial troops, who usually outnumbered them and were much better armed. After the abolition of slavery, many maroon groups were assimilated into the larger societies that surrounded them. Of the hundreds of such communities once spread across the hemisphere, only a few still exist. Present-day Maroon\* peoples include the Saramaka, Ndjuka, Paramaka, Matawai and Kwinti of Suriname; the

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\*The authors have chosen to spell "maroon" in lower case when it is used in its original descriptive sense, synonymous with 'escaped slave'. It is capitalized only when used generically to refer to contemporary peoples or ethnic groups.





An Aluku woman in Asisi, French Guiana, bakes cassava cakes (*baka kasaba*). Maroons originally learned this method of food preparation from Native Americans. Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye

Aluku of French Guiana; the Palenqueros of Colombia; the Windward and Leeward Maroons of Jamaica; the Garífuna of the Atlantic coast of Central America; the Maroons of the Costa Chica region in Mexico; and the Seminole Maroons of Texas, Oklahoma, Mexico and the Bahamas.

Eight contemporary Maroon peoples from six different countries will participate in the Festival in this Quincentenary year. Three of these peoples come from the Amazon basin in north-eastern South America. The ancestors of the Saramaka began escaping from Surinamese plantations in the late 17th century; after fighting against the Dutch for nearly a century, they made a treaty with them in 1762. Today the Saramaka live along the Suriname River in the interior rainforest of Suriname. Their neighbors, the Ndjuka or Okanisi (Aukaners), inhabit the Tapanahony and Cottica rivers to the east. The ancestors of the Ndjuka, who began fleeing from Dutch plantations in the early 18th century, made a treaty with the Dutch in 1760. Across the Maroni and Lawa rivers in French Guiana live the Aluku or Boni, whose forebears began leaving the plantations shortly after the Ndjuka. In 1776-7 they crossed from Suriname into French Guiana, where they have lived ever since. After

years of struggle, their freedom was recognized by a joint treaty with the French and Dutch in 1860.

The South American country of Colombia is home to the contemporary Maroon community of Palenque de San Basilio, not far from the port of Cartagena, which was once at the center of the Spanish slave trade. The Palenqueros are descended from slaves who escaped from Spanish plantations during the 17th century. After several failed attempts to eradicate them, the colonial government and the ancestors of the Palenqueros came to terms between 1713 and 1717.

In the Caribbean island of Jamaica are some of the best known contemporary Maroon communities. The Windward Maroons are based in the villages of Moore Town, Scotts Hall and Charles Town in the eastern Blue Mountains. They can trace their origins as a people back to 1655, when the British seized the island from the Spanish, and a large number of slaves fled into the hills. In later years these initial runaways were joined by others from British plantations. The ancestors of the Leeward Maroons, whose main contemporary settlement is Accompong in the western Cockpit Country, began to escape from plantations in the late 17th century. By the



1730s, both groups posed such a threat to the plantation system that the British colonial government had to sue for peace, concluding separate treaties with the two groups in 1739.

The Maroons of the Costa Chica area in the Mexican states of Guerrero and Oaxaca are descendants of slaves who began escaping in the late 16th century from Spanish cattle ranches and estates along the Pacific coast. When the colonial government launched a military campaign against them, they retreated into more inaccessible areas, where they remained undefeated until the abolition of slavery in Mexico in 1829.

The Seminole Maroons, now divided among Oklahoma, Texas, the Bahamas and the northern Mexican state of Coahuila, originated in Spanish Florida, where groups of escaped slaves from South Carolina and Georgia began seeking refuge in the early 18th century. Though they developed a close alliance with those Native American groups who came to be known as Seminole Indians, these maroons maintained a separate identity. After the end of the Seminole War in 1842, they were transported along with their Indian allies to Oklahoma. To avoid raids by slave-catchers, a portion of the Seminole Maroons moved to Mexico, where their descendants, known as *Negros Mascogos*, remain today. During the mid-19th century, some of these Mexican Seminoles moved to Texas, where they joined the U.S. Cavalry as part of a special division known as the Seminole Negro Indian Scouts. Their descendants live today in Brackettville and Del Rio, Texas.

### **Adaptation and Survival in a New World**

It is difficult for us today to imagine the challenges faced by the earliest maroons. Runaways who banded together usually came from several different parts of Africa, and thus were divided by differences of culture and language. They found themselves in new and largely unfamiliar environments, in constant danger of recapture. Sudden attack by colonial troops remained a permanent possibility. Developing means of subsistence and defense were the primary demands of this new world.

But the struggle for survival was not limited to learning how to live off the land or fend off invaders. In fact, it required the creation of whole new societies, cultures and languages. In forming new maroon communities, culturally diverse people were drawn into a complex process of adaptation. They were obliged to

adapt not only to the natural environment, but to one another's different ways of speaking, working, praying, governing, staking claims, making music, courting, marrying, giving birth, bequeathing and dying.

In devising methods of subsistence, military strategies, systems of authority and shared languages, maroons typically selected from the full range of cultural resources available to them — African, Native American and European. The breadth of this spectrum of resources improved their chances for survival.

The legacy of this process of cultural exchange and adaptation is clearly discernible among contemporary Maroons. Among the Ndjuka and Aluku of Suriname and French Guiana, for instance, both the primary staple, cassava, and the methods used to prepare it are of Native American derivation, as is much of the technology they rely on for hunting, fishing and cultivation. Similarly, two popular dishes prepared by Seminole Maroons in Texas and Oklahoma, *suffki* and *toli*, were learned from Native Americans. In Jamaica and Suriname, on the other hand, contemporary Maroon foodways often show a pronounced African influence. Palenqueros in Colombia, Windward and Leeward Maroons in Jamaica and Surinamese Maroons employ many different types of animal, fish and bird traps of varied origin — African, Native American and European. Traditions of herbal medicine, for which contemporary Maroons everywhere are renowned, also reflect all three sources.

The music, dance, verbal arts and spiritual traditions of contemporary Maroon peoples, however, are predominantly African in origin. But even here there are exceptions. The Aluku of French Guiana, for example, honor their dead with certain songs and dances said to have been learned long ago from Native Americans with whom their ancestors shared the Guianese rainforest, while the Seminole Maroons of Texas have an American Indian-style dance called the Seminole Stomp. In contrast, the creole languages spoken by contemporary Maroons have vocabularies primarily of European origin, though they contain substantial numbers of African and Native American words as well. At a deeper level, the sound patterns and certain stylistic features of these languages clearly reflect the influence of African languages.

Even those contemporary Maroon cultural traditions that are most recognizably of African origin — those that are devoid of European or

Native American influence — are outcomes of a process that long ago blended diverse elements from a variety of different African cultures. For this reason, the cultures of Maroons today are best understood as creative syntheses that have combined and recombined originally diverse African elements, as well as non-African elements, in unique ways. This historical process of blending and adaptation, resulting in cultures that are simultaneously old and new, has come to be known as “creolization.” Creolization has occurred widely in the Americas over the last 500 years and continues to lend our multicultural hemisphere much of its cultural vitality. For the ancestors of the Maroons, this creolizing process was part and parcel of the struggle for survival on the fringes of the plantation world. As such, it was itself part of the process of resistance.

### **Self Determination: Traditions of Government**

Creating new societies away from the plantations could not be achieved through cultural creolization alone. In order to survive, early maroon groups needed to devise ways of regulating social and economic life. Rights and obligations toward neighbors and kin, mechanisms for dispute settlement and rules of leadership, succession, ownership, marriage and inheritance all had to be established. Free to experiment, maroons succeeded in developing a range of political systems that effectively fulfilled these needs.

In the early days, political organization was frequently shaped by military considerations. Strong and able leadership, often backed by religious sanctions, helped to ensure survival in societies under siege. Among the early maroon leaders who achieved fame for their exceptional qualities were Bayano of Panama, Yanga of Mexico, Ganga Zumba of Brazil, Benkos Bioho of Colombia, Nanny and Kojo of Jamaica, Boni of Suriname and John Horse (also known as Juan Caballo or Gopher John) of the southern United States and Mexico.

In later years, the treaties many groups made with colonial governments led to a gradual erosion of autonomy. Nonetheless, some Maroon societies maintain distinct political systems stemming from the early days. Surinamese and French Guianese Maroons, for instance, are headed by paramount chiefs known as *Gaamá* or *Gaanman*, who are installed with great ceremony and hold office for life. The office of paramount chief is vested with a great deal of authority, and its occupant is treated with great respect. Assist-

ing these tribal chiefs are a large number of village chiefs (*Kabiteni*), under-officers (*Basia*), and councils in which elders play a leading role.

Public issues are discussed and debated, and cases tried and judged, in the context of formal meetings known as *kuutu*. The more serious *kuutu* are presided over by chiefs and prominent elders. *Kuutu* oratory is always interactive and highly stylized, performed as an antiphonal exchange between a series of speakers and a formal interlocutor known as *pikiman* (literally, “the man who answers”). Governed by a complex etiquette, and characterized by indirection, digression and metaphor, oratory is easily distinguishable from ordinary speech.

*Kuutu* may be spontaneous meetings of four or five family members who come together to iron out a domestic problem; or they may be carefully planned gatherings in which the paramount chief and all the village chiefs assemble to discuss issues affecting the entire society. Well adapted to highly fluid social circumstances, such as those in which the early ancestors lived, the *kuutu* tradition continues to serve Surinamese Maroons admirably today.

Jamaican Maroons also maintain their own special system of local government. The Windward Maroon community of Moore Town, for example, is led by an elected chief bearing the title *Colonel*, who works together with under-officers and an appointed council known as the *Kamati* (Committee). Disputes between individuals over sections of communally-held Maroon lands — and a host of other relatively minor problems — are aired and resolved in the context of committee meetings. Issues that concern the entire community, on the other hand, require larger gatherings called “Township Meetings,” to which the general public is summoned by blowing the *abeng*, a West African signaling device made from a cow’s horn.

This year’s Festival is honored by the presence of several Maroon leaders, including paramount chiefs from Suriname and French Guiana, and Maroon Colonels from Jamaica. These distinguished representatives carry on the proud traditions of self government established and maintained over the generations by their predecessors. During this Quincentenary year, they will have the opportunity to meet one another for the first time.

### **Maroon Arts**

In spite of the grim struggle for survival that was part of everyday life in the early days,



Maroons were able to create vibrant, distinctive and diverse artistic traditions. These expressive forms — music, dance, verbal arts, foodways, crafts, architecture, personal adornment, and others — drew upon the Maroons' African heritage as well as Native American and European resources, but emerged as something new and unique.

The very existence of these remarkable Maroon arts demonstrates that even peoples under siege have been able to produce great beauty. They have been able to remain deeply concerned about human intangibles, such as aesthetic expression, upon which the quality of life depends. To paraphrase a song composed by Wailing Roots, a reggae band formed by young Aluku Maroons in French Guiana: "We were slaves and we cried tears of blood, but [the Aluku leader] Boni led our ancestors out of captivity so we could enjoy life."

### History and Maroon Identity in the Present

Contemporary Maroon peoples' identities are rooted in memories of the collective struggles from which their societies emerged. In most Maroon communities, a profound sense of history pervades present-day life.

Among the Accompong Maroons of Jamaica, for example, celebrations are held every January honoring the great Maroon leader, Kojo, who signed the treaty with the British in 1739. Attended by thousands of visitors, this annual event centers on old Maroon songs, dances and ceremonies passed down from the ancestors. The following song speaks of the Maroons' continuing tradition of self government:

Law hold-oh!  
Maroon law hold already-eh  
Long taiga wallo  
Law hold-oh

Law hold already-oh  
Come give me me note a hand-eh  
Long taiga wallo  
Law hold-oh

The Maroons' own laws still hold, the song asserts, and their right to govern themselves forever has been ratified in writing (to which the "note" in the song refers).

Likewise, the Moore Town Maroons commemorate their famous ancestress and spiritual leader, Nanny, with a festival every October. As part of the ceremony, Maroon men sometimes



A Jamaican Maroon from Accompong Town plays the gumbé drum during the annual January 6 celebration in honor of the Maroon hero Kojo. Photo by Vivien Chen

conceal themselves from head to toe in the leafy vine known as cacoon. This ingenious camouflage, which Maroons call "ambush," was used by the ancestors during their battles against the British more than two centuries ago. Every autumn in Brackettville, Texas, the Seminole Maroons gather to hold a memorial service at the graves of their ancestors and to celebrate Seminole Day with stories and foodways passed down over the generations.

In most contemporary Maroon communities, oral historians remain an important source of knowledge about the past. In Suriname, Jamaica and elsewhere, narratives about "first-time" — the early days of flight and struggle — are told with great emotion and circumspection, and only in certain contexts. While a portion of this cherished historical knowledge may be shared with outsiders, much of it is held sacred and kept secret.

For Maroons everywhere, history is a cause for great pride, a foundation of collective identity and a source of strength and confidence as they face the future. Although their histories dif-





Members of the Aluku Maroon reggae band, Wailing Roots, prepare for a news broadcast at Studio T.R.M., an Aluku-run television station in Maripasoula, French Guiana. Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye

fer, they all speak eloquently of the heritage of creativity and resistance that is as important a part of this hemisphere's experience as the tidal wave of greed, destruction and oppression that followed Columbus' first landing.

### Maroon Identity in the 1990s and Beyond

Maroon communities no longer face the same challenges that confronted them during their formation. Slavery is gone, but nowadays there are new challenges. Though different in character from the old, they nevertheless threaten the survival of Maroon communities as distinct groups with unique identities. Maroon villages are no longer as isolated as they once were. In some places roads have been built where none existed before; in others, new modes of transportation, such as airplanes and canoes with outboard motors, have made Maroon communities more accessible. External pressures ranging from civil wars to government welfare programs erode and threaten to undermine the freedom and autonomy that Maroons fought so hard to win. A growing number of young people are migrating out of their communities to urban centers. Those who stay know less and less about the traditions of their ancestors. Maroon ways

must now compete with the allure of the world of outsiders for the attention of the young. Pollution impinges on the natural environments in which Maroons live.

Governments have changed hands since the original Maroon treaties were made. Ironically, the ending of colonial rule has left Maroon communities with treaties that remain sacrosanct to them, but which present governments may find anachronistic (Kopytoff 1979). The ambiguous status of these treaties has placed Maroon communities in a vulnerable position. It has threatened the systems of communal land tenure maintained by several communities, and in some cases has compromised the authority of their leaders.

Relationships between Maroons who have left their communities of origin to reside permanently in the cities and those who have stayed home are often ambiguous and sometimes strained. The unique languages, bodies of knowledge and skills that are integral to Maroon identity and culture are in danger of not being passed on, and in some cases threaten to disappear within one or two generations.

In the face of these challenges, Maroons have applied their ancestors' spirit of creativity



and resistance in new ways to meet modern circumstances. Elected Aluku officials in the French overseas department of French Guiana struggle to accommodate a foreign system of government to their own. Meanwhile, they participate in conferences with Native American peoples of the region to examine whether and how their systems of traditional law can continue to co-exist with French law. Young Ndjukas living in the coastal Surinamese capital of Paramaribo have formed social and cultural self-help organizations such as Kifoko to promote pride in their own heritage, and have begun to preserve and document their own cultural traditions. Community historians among the Texas Seminole are becoming curators and documenters of their own heritage and are making sure that it is represented in broader celebrations of African-American history and culture. Jamaican Maroon leaders in Moore Town and Accompong are working to educate and encourage younger Maroons in the traditions that are their birthright. These elders are also investigating ways of developing a sensitive and respectful type of cultural tourism that would provide employment for their children and might encourage them to remain in their home communities.

Though the challenges that faced the earliest ancestors were of a different kind, similar questions — of adaptation and survival, self-determination and identity, and innovation and continuity — are very much alive for their descendants. In the closing years of the 20th century, these questions remain as much a part of Maroon existence as they were nearly 500 years ago when the courageous ancestors of these people first began to fight for the right to remain their own masters.

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#### *Suggested Listening*

- Drums of Defiance: Maroon Music from the Earliest Free Black Communities of Jamaica*. Smithsonian/Folkways 40412.
- From Slavery to Freedom: Music of the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname*. Lyrichord 7354.
- Jamaican Ritual Music from the Mountains and Coast*. Lyrichord 7394.
- Music from Saramaka: A Dynamic Afro-American Tradition*. Smithsonian/Folkways 4225.
- Musique Boni et Wayana de Guyane*. Disques Vogue / Musée de l'Homme 290.