

Maroons:

Rebel Slaves in the Americas

Richard Price

The man who was to become the first African-American maroon arrived within a decade of Columbus' landfall on the very first slave ship to reach the Americas. One of the last maroons to escape from slavery was still alive in Cuba only 15 years ago. The English word "maroon" derives from Spanish *cimarrón* — itself based on an Arawakan (Taino) Indian root. *Cimarrón* originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola, and soon after it was applied to American Indian slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards as well. By the end of the 1530s, the word had taken on strong connotations of being "fierce," "wild" and "unbroken," and was used primarily to refer to African-American runaways.

For more than four centuries, the communities formed by such escaped slaves dotted the fringes of plantation America, from Brazil to the southeastern United States, from Peru to the American Southwest. Known variously as *palenques*, *quilombos*, *mocambos*, *cumbes*, *mambises*, or *ladeiras*, these new societies ranged from tiny bands that survived less than a year to powerful states encompassing thousands of members that survived for generations and even centuries. Today their descendants still form semi-independent enclaves in several parts of the hemisphere — for example, in Suriname, French Guiana, Jamaica, Colombia and Belize — fiercely proud of their maroon origins and, in some cases at least, faithful to unique cultural traditions that were forged during the earliest days of African-American history.

During the past several decades, historical

Richard Price's most recent books include First-Time, winner of the Elsie Clews Parsons Prize of the American Folklore Society, and Alabi's World, winner of the Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association. With Sally Price he has written Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest, Two Evenings in Saramaka, Stedman's Surinam, and, most recently, Equatoria.

scholarship has done much to dispel the myth of the docile slave. The extent of violent resistance to enslavement has been documented rather fully — from the revolts in the slave factories of West Africa and mutinies during the Middle Passage to the organized rebellions that began to sweep most colonies within a decade after the arrival of the first slave ships. There is also a growing literature on the pervasiveness of various forms of "day-to-day" resistance — from simple malingering to subtle but systematic acts of sabotage.

Maroons and their communities can be seen to hold a special significance for the study of slave societies, for they were both the antithesis of all that slavery stood for, and at the same time a widespread and embarrassingly visible part of these systems. The very nature of plantation slavery engendered violence and resistance, and the wilderness setting of early New World plantations allowed marronage and the ubiquitous existence of organized maroon communities. Throughout Afro-America, such communities stood out as an heroic challenge to white authority, and as living proof of a slave consciousness that refused to be limited by the whites' definition and manipulation of it.

Within the first decade of most colonies' existence, the most brutal punishments had already been inflicted on recaptured rebel slaves, and in many cases these were quickly written into law. An early 18th-century visitor to Suriname reported that

if a slave runs away into the forest in order to avoid work for a few weeks, upon his being captured his Achilles tendon is removed for the first offence, while for a second offence... his right leg is amputated in order to stop his running away; I myself was a witness to slaves being punished this way.

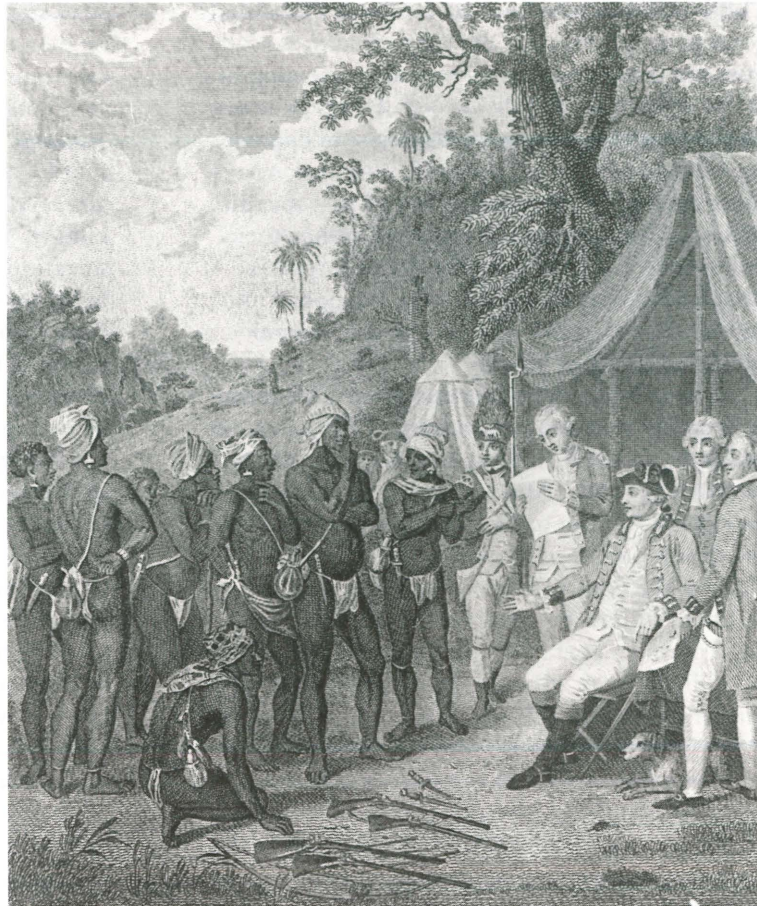
And similar punishments for marronage —

This engraving from ca. 1786 depicts peace negotiations between Maroons and British soldiers on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent in 1773. These Maroons were ancestors of the Garífuna people who live today along the Atlantic coastline of Central America. *Engraving from an original painting by Agostino Brunias; courtesy National Library of Jamaica*

from being castrated to being slowly roasted to death — are reported from different regions throughout the Americas.

Marronage on the grand scale, with individual fugitives banding together to create independent communities of their own, struck directly at the foundations of the plantation system. It presented military and economic threats that often strained the colonies to their very limits. In a remarkable number of cases throughout the Americas, whites were forced to appeal to their former slaves for a peace agreement. In their typical form, such treaties — which we know of from Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Mexico and Suriname — offered maroon communities their freedom, recognized their territorial integrity, and made some provision for meeting their economic needs. In return, the treaties required maroons to end all hostilities toward the plantations, to return all future runaways, and, often, to aid the whites in hunting them down. Of course, many maroon societies never reached this negotiating stage, having been crushed by massive force of arms; and even when treaties were proposed they were sometimes refused or quickly violated. Nevertheless, new maroon communities seemed to appear almost as quickly as the old ones were exterminated, and they remained, from a colonial perspective, the “chronic plague” and “gangrene” of many plantation societies right up to final Emancipation.

To be viable, maroon communities had to be inaccessible, and villages were typically located in remote, inhospitable areas. In the southern United States, isolated swamps were a favorite setting. In Jamaica, some of the most famous maroon groups lived in “cockpit country,” where deep canyons and limestone sinkholes abound



but water and good soil are scarce. And in the Guianas, seemingly impenetrable jungles provided maroons a safe haven.

Many maroons throughout the hemisphere developed extraordinary skills in guerrilla warfare. To the bewilderment of their colonial enemies, whose rigid and conventional tactics were learned on the open battlefields of Europe, these highly adaptable and mobile warriors took maximum advantage of local environments. They struck and withdrew with great rapidity, making extensive use of ambushes to catch their adversaries in crossfire. They fought only when and where they chose, relying on trustworthy intelligence networks among non-maroons (both slaves and white settlers), and often communicating military information by drums and horns.

The initial maroons in any New World colony hailed from a wide range of societies in West and Central Africa; at the outset, they shared neither language nor other major aspects of culture. Their collective task was nothing less than to create new communities and institutions, via a process of integrating cultural elements drawn largely from a variety of African societies.

Those scholars who have most closely examined contemporary Maroon life agree that these societies are often uncannily "African" in feeling but at the same time largely devoid of directly transplanted systems. However "African" in character, no maroon social, political, religious, or aesthetic system can be reliably traced to a specific African ethnic group. They reveal rather their syncretistic composition: they were forged by peoples bearing diverse African, European and Amerindian cultures who met in the dynamic setting of the New World.

The political system of the great 17th-century Brazilian maroon community of Palmares, for example, which R.K. Kent has characterized as an "African" state, "did not derive from a *particular* central African model, but from several." In the development of the kinship system of the Ndjuka Maroons of Suriname, writes André Köbben, "undoubtedly their West-African heritage played a part ... [and] the influence of the matrilineal Akan tribes is unmistakable, but so is that of patrilineal tribes ... [and there are] significant differences between the Akan and Ndjuka matrilineal systems." Historical research has revealed that the woodcarving of the Suriname Maroons, long considered "an African art in the Americas" on the basis of many formal resemblances, is (in the words of Jean Hurault) in fact a fundamentally new, African-American art "for which it would be pointless to seek the origin through direct transmission of any particular African style." And detailed historical investigations — both in museums and in the field — of a range of cultural phenomena among the Sarakama Maroons of Suriname have confirmed the continuing existence of dynamic, creative processes that inspire these societies.

Maroon cultures do possess a remarkable number of direct and sometimes spectacular continuities from particular African peoples, ranging from military techniques for defense to formulas for warding off sorcery. But these are of the same type as those that can be found, albeit less frequently, in African-American communities throughout the hemisphere. And

stressing these isolated African "retentions" may neglect cultural continuities of a far more significant kind. Roger Bastide divided Afro-American religions into those he considered "preserved" or "canned" — like Brazilian *candomblé* — and those that he considered "alive" or "living" — like Haitian *vaudou*. The former, he argued, represent a kind of "defense mechanism" or "cultural fossilization," a fear that any small change may bring on the end; the latter are more secure of their future and freer to adapt to the changing needs of their adherents. More generally, tenacious fidelity to "African" forms can be shown to be in many cases an indication of a culture that has finally lost touch with a meaningful part of its African past. Certainly, one of the most striking features of West and Central African cultural systems is their internal dynamism, their ability to grow and change. The cultural uniqueness of the more developed maroon societies (e.g., those in Suriname) rests firmly on their fidelity to "African" cultural principles at these deeper levels — whether aesthetic, political, or domestic — rather than on the frequency of their isolated "retentions" of form.

Maroon groups had a rare freedom to develop and transform African ideas from a variety of societies and to adapt them to changing circumstance. With their hard-earned freedom and resilient creativity they have built systems that are *at once* meaningfully African and among the most truly "alive" and culturally dynamic of African-American cultures.

Further Readings

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- _____. 1983. *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
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