

The Political Organization of Maroon Communities in Suriname

H.R.M. Libretto

Translated from Dutch by Kenneth Bilby

Maroons are descendants of Africans forced to labor on plantations who escaped and, by waging guerilla wars in the 17th and 18th centuries, succeeded in forming relatively independent tribes* in the interior. After signing treaties with the colonial rulers, the Maroons, also known as Bush Negroes, were able to build societies undisturbed, drawing upon their African heritage.

The number of Maroons living in tribal societies is presently estimated at 45,000, divided among the following tribes:

1. Saramaka (Saamaka)
2. Aukaners (Ndjuka or Okanisi)
3. Matuwari (Matawai)
4. Paramaka (Paamaka)
5. Aluku or Boni

The tribes took their names from the regions where they initially settled or from the name of a chief. The territory of each tribe is bounded by mountains, rivers, watersheds and forests.

The tribes are comprised of subtribes (matrilineal clans or *lo*) that have established one or more villages. The persons of a subtribe feel bound together through ties of kinship and community history that go back to the formative period of marronage.

In that period of warfare certain persons emerged as leaders with military qualities. The chief or *Gaanman* of a tribe would originate from the military leader's subtribe. Among the Saramaka, this is the Matjau clan, and among the Ndjuka, the Oto clan.

The colonial treaties, which still form the

basis of the relationship between the central government and the traditional Maroon authorities, stipulated that the Maroons could move freely in the area they then occupied. They were, however, without legal title to the land. The territory of a tribe forms a unitary expanse of land, but is usually situated along a number of river basins.

Although it is certain that not all Maroons had matrilineal origins, a system of matrilineal descent is practiced generally.

In each tribe, the government consists of the following:

1. A tribal or paramount chief (*Gaanman*, *Gaamá*)
2. A number of head chiefs (*Ede Kabiteni*)
3. A number of village chiefs (*Kabiteni*)
4. A number of male and female under-officers (*Basia*)

The designation and installation of these officials takes place according to Maroon tradition.

After installation, each official, upon recommendation, is appointed by the Surinamese government. He or she then becomes eligible for an allowance, an official uniform, and a variety of other compensations.

The Gaanman (Paramount Chief)

The Gaanman, an individual who stands for his entire tribe, exclusively controls relations with the central government and thus represents the tribe externally. The tribal chief nominates lower officials for appointment by the government. He is the head of a tribal assembly. Because of the importance of his role, the Gaan-

H.R.M. Libretto is District Commissioner of the Sipaliwini District, the administrative division that encompasses the interior of Suriname, where most of the Maroon villages are located. An expert in customary law and government, he is the author of Het Gezags- en Bestuursstelsel in het Binnenland van Suriname (The System of Authority and Government in the Interior of Suriname).

* Editor's note: As this essay illustrates, the word "tribe" implies an administrative unit. It specifies the corporateness of a group — the rights and duties of the members of the group as a whole — from a governmental point of view. Tribe is not necessarily a cultural unit, and when describing distinct groups, as in Africa and elsewhere, most writers now use the term "ethnic group" to indicate the group's distinct social or cultural identity in a multi-ethnic nation-state.



Gaamá Songó, Paramount Chief of the Saramaka Maroons, receives a gift from Festival curators at his headquarters in Asindóópo, Suriname. One of his under-officers formally presents the gift to him. *Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye*

man is released from the mourning obligations incumbent upon other members of his community.

The Ede Kabiteni (Head Chief)

The Ede Kabiteni represents the Gaanman, the supreme authority, in supervising the administration of a specified territory. Usually, a village chief is elevated to the office of head chief by virtue of his administrative abilities.

The Kabiteni (Village Chief)

The village chief wields authority over a village on behalf of the paramount chief. Villages are represented externally, as units, by the Kabiteni, who has a decisive voice in all deliberations except those occurring in tribe-wide assemblies.

The Basia (Under-Officer)

The Basia assists the higher officials in the carrying out of all ritual and administrative matters. The Basia's principal duty is to act as town crier and maintainer of order. The sphere of a

female Basia's responsibility is restricted to domestic activities during ceremonial occasions. In this society, women have a subordinate role. All officials are appointed for life.

Administration of Justice

Among all Maroon societies, the jural system is nearly the same. Each tribe creates its own body of laws in the course of tribal councils. Justice is based on unwritten rules and is not devised exclusively by persons occupying official positions. In actuality, elders, other respected persons and family councils dispense justice. The reaching of a verdict, which always takes place during a meeting (*kuutu*), is always public. The suspect is not present during the trial but is represented by a family member or other advocate. Conflicts between families are settled by family councils. All conflicts, transgressions and minor offenses are settled according to tribal custom. Serious crimes such as murder are handed over to the central government. Finally, it should be mentioned that a chief's house offers temporary asylum to all transgressors and accused persons.