

# Arts of the Suriname Maroons

*Sally Price*

The daily life of Maroons in the interior of Suriname is unusually rich in artistic activity and aesthetic discussion. The anthropologist Melville Herskovits remarked in 1930 (using a term for the Suriname Maroons that was standard in his day): "Bush Negro art in all its ramifications is, in the final analysis, Bush Negro life." A scene like the following is typical:

Three women are sitting in an open-sided shed. Carefully patterned arrangements of scar tissue create sharp accents on their faces and chests, and their wrap-skirts and waist ties make splashes of color against the earthen floor. One of them is baking manioc cakes over a barely smoldering fire. She spreads the flour deftly over the dry griddle, draws her fingers over the surface to form selected decorative patterns, and sifts a thin layer of flour on top. While each cake bakes, she works on a complex, triple-technique hairdo for the second woman, who sits on a handsomely carved wooden stool, an as-yet-uncarved calabash shell on her lap. Well-known in the village for her technical mastery and sense of design in this medium, she is marking out a pattern for the third woman, who will later use pieces of broken glass to finish the bowl carving. For now howev-

er, the third woman is busy crocheting a pair of multi-color calfbands for her husband, working slowly around a bottle to create an evenly circular band.

The noted carver rotates the prepared calabash shell, trying to recapture in her mind the details of a particular configuration. She discusses with the woman sitting at her side the design they'd like to reproduce, but when neither one can remember just how its appendages were curved, she settles on a new version which, she

later decides, is even better than the original. The woman with the calfbands crochets steadily, enlisting both her friends' advice about the width of the red and yellow stripes that will form its center. As the three of them work, their conversation alternates between village gossip and discussion of their artistry.

Gatherings like this bring together the artistic dimensions in different areas of Maroon life, from preparing food and serving meals to furniture, clothes and grooming. Artistry, aesthetic discussion and social interaction are routinely woven together in the fab-

ric of Maroon daily life.

Music and dance are equally integrated into village activities. Specialized dances are performed by the mediums of various possession gods, and there are many secular dances, each enjoyed in a particular social context. It is rare to walk through a Maroon village without hearing someone singing. Distinctive song styles contribute to the whole range of Maroon ritual events, from complex funerary rites to the



**This Ndjuka wooden tray is used for winnowing rice. Winnowing trays are often carved by Maroon men as gifts for their wives. Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye**

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"domestication" of a newly discovered spirit; they are also part of communal labor such as felling trees or hauling logs and are also performed in many casual or even solitary settings. Drums are used singly or in various combinations to accompany different secular dance forms; to announce, supervise and comment on the proceedings of large public council meetings; and to communicate with each kind of possession god, with other deities and spirits, and with the ancestors. And there are other musical instruments as well — bells and wooden trumpets, a stringed instrument made with a gourd, and "finger pianos."

Finally, the verbal arts — folk tales, play languages, proverbs, speeches made by possessed mediums, oratory and prayer — employ a wide range of styles based on everyday languages, and they keep alive a large number of distinctive esoteric languages used only in special ritual settings.

In general, Maroons expect all these activities to be practiced and discussed by the entire population — in contrast to many African societies, where only certain individuals are trained to be artists, and where critics may also play a specialized role. The most important cultural division is gender-related; men's and women's arts are distinctive in their tools, media and decorative styles. At least until recently, all Maroon men were adept at carving a wide range of wooden objects as gifts for women — from canoes and house fronts to combs and food stirrers — and all women produced elaborate patchwork and embroidered textiles to be worn by men. Even today, this pattern of general artistic exchange helps shape relations between men and women for most of the Maroon population.

When Maroons talk about art, which they do often, they almost invariably refer in some way to its central role in social life — to artfully-designed objects presented at a birth ceremony or at a ritual marking adulthood, to beautifully decorative textiles draped on the gabled coffin at a dignitary's funeral rites, to the art objects exchanged to mark the establishment and continuation of a marriage, to the gifts given to help celebrate a man's return from long-term wage labor at the coast, and so forth. People rarely comment on a woodcarving without referring to the maker, to the woman for whom it was made, and to details of their relationship at the moment he presented it to her.

Many visitors to Suriname have understood Maroon arts less in the context of their con-

temporary social setting than in the context of their African roots. The villages of the rainforest have often been seen as a "little Africa in America" and Maroon arts as direct "African survivals." The title of one article in a 1939 issue of *Natural History* magazine promised a description of "Africa's Lost Tribes in South America" in the form of "an on-the-spot account of blood-chilling African rites of 200 years ago preserved intact in the jungles of South America by a tribe of runaway slaves." More recent visitors have even claimed that Maroons have maintained a society "that is 'more African' than much of Africa is today." Behind this view lies the myth that so-called primitive societies exist outside of history, changing only when other, "more advanced" societies impinge on them and erode their "traditional way of life."

In fact, non-Western societies differ enormously in their attitudes toward change and in the amount of internal dynamism that characterizes their cultural life. The societies of the Suriname Maroons, like the vast majority of societies in West and Central Africa, have *always* been highly dynamic. Art historical research in archives, museums and the villages of the Suriname interior has demonstrated conclusively the high value Maroons place on creativity, innovation and artistic development from one generation to the next. Far from being static leftovers from 17th-century Africa, Maroon art has continually developed as its makers played and experimented with their ancestral heritage, adapting it creatively to their changing lives.

We know that the original Maroons produced little decorative woodcarving or textiles; their clothing was extremely simple and their houses and furnishings were largely unembellished. It was only over time that the relatively crude woodcarving of the mid-19th century evolved into a beautiful 20th-century art that has struck many outsiders as "African-looking." And the multi-colored Maroon narrow-strip textiles that so closely resemble West African *kente* cloth were invented only during the present century as a replacement for a very different textile art formerly embroidered by Maroon women in red, white, and black or navy. Paints, introduced in a few conservative colors some 100 years ago, have since come to play a central role among the eastern Maroons. And calabashes, which until the mid-19th century were decorated only on the outside surfaces by men, began to be carved on the insides by women, who used new tools and produced an entirely new decorative style.





A Saramaka man in Asindópo displays a decorated rattle used to accompany songs for forest spirits. In front of him are two carved *apinti* drums. Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye

A young Saramaka woman, Fandolina, braids the hair of her friend Doisimôni in Asindópo. The name of this particular hairstyle, *goón uwii*, likens it to a cultivated field. Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye



In light of this history of change, how does one explain the visible resemblances between the arts of the Maroons and those of the peoples of West and Central Africa? If stylistic developments have repeatedly led Maroon arts in new directions, then how has the cultural legacy of Africa been expressed in Maroon art over the centuries? The answer lies more in the continuity of African aesthetic *ideas* than in the direct transmission of African artistic *forms* from one generation to the next. The early Maroons were not in a position to continue such African traditions as weaving and ivory carving, but they did succeed in carrying on many of the fundamental ideas that underlie the style and meaning of those arts in Africa — ideas about symmetry, color contrast, and syncopation, and above all, the principal understanding that art has a place in all aspects of daily life.

Even under the harshly repressive conditions of slavery and during the century-long period of guerrilla warfare against the Dutch colonists, the Maroons still found opportunities for storytelling, dancing, drumming and singing. They made aesthetic choices about the way they walked, carried their babies and wore their hair. They expressed preferences in the arrangement of their household furnishings, the layout of their gardens, and in the way they mended their

clothes, served their meals, and in countless other aspects of daily life. These expressive forms did not require the specific resources of more formally elaborated artistic media, and in this way, aesthetic ideas were passed on and applied inventively to the changing artistic materials available to each generation. Forged in an inhospitable rainforest by people under constant threat of annihilation, the arts of the Suriname Maroons stand as enduring testimony to African-American resilience and creativity. They reflect the remarkable vitality of the Maroon artistic imagination, an especially exuberant expression of the rich and extensive system of African cultural ideas.

#### Further Readings

- Price, Richard, and Sally Price. 1991. *Two Evenings in Saramaka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Price, Sally. 1984. *Co-Wives and Calabashes*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Price, Sally, and Richard Price. 1980. *Afro-American Art of the Suriname Rain Forest*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

#### Suggested Listening

- Music from Saramaka: A Dynamic Afro-American Tradition*. Smithsonian/Folkways SF 4225.