The Maroon Communitarian Dilemma: Navigating the Interstices between Resistance and Collaboration

***

Robert Connell earned his Bachelor of Environmental Studies degree with honors and a minor in Political Science from York University in 2009. He is currently a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley in African Diaspora Studies. His research focuses on conflicts over resource extraction and sovereignty rights between Maroons and the Jamaican state in the 21st century. His corollary research interests include indigeneity and indigenous struggle, development studies, ethnic multiplicity in the African Diaspora, global environmental politics and ecological economics.

THIS PAPER IS A SYNOPSIS OF THE ORIGINAL

***

From the arrival of the first African slaves in the Spanish colony of Hispaniola in 1502 to the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 (the last slaveholding state of the Americas), a powerful act of resistance stalked the slaving powers. Slaves, most often as individuals or in small groups but sometimes in great numbers, sabotaged and rejected the slave system by fleeing their bondage, an action known as *marronage*. The English word Maroon, denoting an escaped slave and the French word *marronage*, the act of becoming a Maroon, descends from the Spanish *cimarrón*, often explained as a term for wild, escaped animals, suggestive of the slaves being viewed on par with livestock by their masters, although the word may also be a derivative of the Spanish *marrano*, meaning wild boar (Higginson, p.4). Whatever the roots of the term, *marronage* denied the colonists the use of the former slave's labour, while setting an example of resistance for their enslaved contemporaries. The first recorded act of *marronage* in the New World

happened in Hispaniola in 1502 when an anonymous slave, part of the very first contingent of Africans to be transported to the New World, ran off into the hills with the Taîno natives shortly after arriving in the colony (Price, 1973, p.1).

The odds were stacked heavily against these Maroons; in most cases the state employed considerable resources for preventing *marronage* and re-capturing or killing those that did escape. Horrific examples were often made of those who were caught. In Suriname, captured Maroons often had to suffer having their tongues cut out, castration (Price, 1983, p.10) and the amputation of their legs in an effort to prevent further escape (Price, 1988, p.7). It should be noted, however, that in the oral traditions of the Samaraka Maroons of Suriname there is more focus on the crushing day-to-day horror and humiliation of being a slave rather than the brutal responses of the colonists to insubordination (ibid., p.10). That is, it was the entire structure of the slave system that the Africans were attempting to fight and escape from, rather than specific injustices happening therein.

This essay will begin with a historical analysis of the Jamaican Maroons, highlighting the pivotal moments in their struggle to show how their community emerged and threw off their enslavement, culminating in the treaties of 1739. The tenets of these treaties challenge the conventional view of the Maroons as freedom-fighters because they transformed the Maroons into a slave-catching rural police force for the British. Grounded in socio-philosophic analysis, I will interrogate Maroon motives for signing the treaties by applying descriptive ethics, the study of people's beliefs about morality. I will argue that the Maroons, through their doctrines of exceptionalism and the autonomist goals of their leadership, exhibited an ethically communalistic outlook that served to drive them apart from the Africans that remained enslaved; a situation that was further exacerbated by the latter's creolization. I will explain that although dissent did exist within the Maroon ranks, this opposition was ultimately impotent at creating a united, island-wide struggle of all Africans against the slave system. In the end the Maroons would do little more to undermine the slave state once their collective freedom

was secured within it, thus suggesting an essential difference in motive (if not ferocity) from the Haitian Revolution[1].

Marronage was a direct response to slavery, the most dehumanizing of social relations, driven by the slave's yearning for freedom. Slaves ran away to be reunited with family, escape a punishment, out of anger after receiving a punishment, to flee habitual sadism and excess driving or to take temporary leave of work with the intention of eventually returning. Indeed the Maroons were "both the offspring and antithesis of plantation slavery" (Bilby, p.89). The physical act of flight was only the first dangerous step in a long journey towards freedom. After absconding a Maroon had to find sustenance, shelter and ways to prevent their recapture, often with little or no equipment in unfamiliar terrain. While some Maroons would escape to a region where slavery had been abolished, like Fredrick Douglass or Harriet Tubman who fled north from southern U.S. slavery, or built new lives isolated and alone, such as Esteban Montejo[2], the Maroons of Jamaica organized themselves into communities on the peripheries of slaveholding society.

The nuclei of the Maroon communities were formed when the English invaded what was then the Spanish colony of Santiago in 1655. In Jamaica the slaves used the confusion of invasion to abscond into the mountainous interior (Edwards, p.230). Even though the literature makes no mention of *marronage* in Jamaica before the English invasion it stands to reason that it did at least occasionally occur given that the Spanish had been importing Africans since the 16th Century. R.C. Dallas (xxix) was of the opinion that the Spanish would have soon fallen victims to their own slaves had the English invasion been forestalled much longer, although he did not elaborate on this allegation. Bev Carey speculated that runaway African slaves linked up with refugee Taînos in the Rio Grande Valley as early as the 1520's

[1] The Haitian Revolution was a struggle in which African slaves rose up, emancipated themselves and overthrew the entire colonist class, thus creating the first successful slave revolution in history. See James, p.263-65 for a synopsis of Haitian leader Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolutionary constitution.

[2] Esteban Montejo was a Cuban slave who escaped his plantation and lived in the wild alone for several years until emancipation (Thompson, p.59).

although she offered no source for this information (Carey, p.62). Regardless, the English had the foresight to acknowledge as early as the first year of their occupation that "of the Blacks there are many, who are likely (sic) to prove as thorns and pricks in our sides" (Campbell, p.19). Indeed from the beginning of the English invasion to the treaty of 1739, Jamaica descended into a conflagration of desperate guerrilla warfare.

A typical Maroon assault employed complete surprise; the Maroons would silently descend upon the plantations from the hills and jungles, kill any whites they found, plunder the estates for arms, food and other supplies, and carry off the slaves, thereby boosting their numbers and military capabilities (ibid., p.26). Slave revolts and breakouts also swelled the ranks of the Maroons, particularly incorporating those ex-slaves who had the wherewithal and organizational skills to destroy their enslavers from within the plantation (Patterson, p.256). The Maroons became adept at camouflage, stealth, and reconnaissance to the point where an entire community could flee and remain hidden even as incoming English forces overran their settlements (Campbell, p.38-39). Conversely, the English initially proved quite incompetent at guerrilla-style combat and foolishly tried to emulate the open warfare of Renaissance Europe with all its pomp and pageantry. Making themselves easy targets, they would march up to John Crow summit or the Blue Mountains in neat lines wearing their eye catching red coats while beating drums, although by the 1700's, after many painful lessons, they too became accustomed to guerrilla tactics (ibid., p.40).

The initial forty years of the 18th century became a crescendo of Maroon uprisings in Jamaica. The First Maroon War is generally thought to have commenced in 1722 (although it is the opinion of the author that this is misleading since there had been a consistent period of at least low level war between the English and some Maroon group or another since they took the island) as the planters expanded into the northeast coast coming into close proximity with the Windward Maroons, based in the parishes of St. Mary and Portland (Patterson, p.260). The Windwards, having been relatively quiet up until that point, can trace their roots to a band of Spanish affiliated Maroons under the

command of the rebel-slave Juan de Serras and famous leaders like Nanny and Quao. The Leeward Maroons had coalesced in the parishes of St. James and St. Elizabeth and elected Cudjoe as their leader (ibid.). Numerous sorties were sent out against both Maroon tribes, of which the Windwards were far more aggressive. The vast majority of them failed however and only served to enrage and encourage the Maroons, emboldening them enough to actually seize and hold plantations (Campbell, p.79). The greatest British failure was the defeat of a large force of professional soldiers sent to attack the Windwards. They were forced to retreat in a disorganized panic and virtual state of mutiny. The soldiers were so fearful of the Maroons that they refused to advance and may have even destroyed their own supplies so as not to be forced to do so (Patterson, p.267). The psychological impact of fighting a shadowy enemy with a fierce reputation was taking its toll; the colony at this point was teetering on collapse, not to mention bankruptcy, and the fear of an island-wide Maroon-slave insurrection was now frighteningly real in the minds of the colonists (Campbell, p.77).

The tide was soon to turn for the Maroons, however. A tragedy ensued in 1734 when British Captain Stoddard skilfully snuck up on Nanny Town, headquarters of the Windward Maroons, and destroyed it killing many inhabitants (Edwards, p.232). The British also began setting up garrisons in the interior of the country to harass the Maroons (Campbell, p.58). A major Maroon offensive focused directly on military forces guarding the capital, Spanish Town, was repulsed and the Maroons attack force had to scatter back to the hinterland (Edwards, p.233). After these events, a period of relative calm returned to the island during the mid to late 1730s. The Maroons, having experienced rout and repulse, returned to the less extravagant guerrilla tactics of hit-and-run and fleeing in the face of colonial sorties (ibid.). In 1737, the British government enlisted Miskito natives of Honduras, themselves masters of guerrilla warfare, to help suppress the rebels, thus putting the Maroons on a permanent defensive stance (ibid., p.235). With the loss of Nanny Town the less aggressive Leewards, under the leadership of Cudjoe, became the greater Maroon force.

Sensing an opportunity to end the destabilizing war, British Colonel Guthrie was given permission to form a treaty with the

Maroons in 1739 (Patterson, p.271). Greeting Guthrie with submission and fawning, Cudjoe agreed to a treaty that granted the Leeward Maroons freedom and a sizeable portion of the interior of Jamaica, known as the Cockpits. In exchange, Guthrie stipulated that escaped slaves fleeing to the Leewards must be returned to the whites and that the Maroons must help suppress internal and external threats to the colony, while abrogating a significant portion of Maroon juridical power to the colonial government (ibid., p.272). From all accounts the Windward Maroons (and even high ranking members of the Leeward Maroons) were disgusted by this treaty, but with Cudjoe tolerating no dissent in his own camp and threatening to ally with the British against the Windwards, Windward leader Quao had little choice but to sign a similar treaty (ibid., 274). Thus concluded 84 years of almost continuous warfare between the planters and the Maroons[3]. Despite an arguably ignoble ending to the war, which ultimately did little to change the slave system and in the short term actually strengthened it with the inclusion of a new capable ally, the Jamaican Maroons proved themselves to be masters of sustained guerrilla warfare.

I will now re-examine the above historical narrative using descriptive ethics to determine the values that guided the Maroons in their struggle and their agreement to sign the treaties. I will argue that although the unforgiving circumstances of the war played a part in the Maroon acceptance of the treaty terms, the Maroons agreed to collaborate with the slave power because the key Maroon leader and decision maker at that time, Cudjoe, was guided by a generally *communitarian* ethos. This overrode any of Cudjoe's solidarisitic feelings toward the still-enslaved Africans and led him to find peace with the slave system, provided the community's needs were met with a guarantee of their own security and freedom. I will utilize philosopher Nigel Dower's definition of communitarianism as an ethos in which one's ethical duty is limited to those with whom one shares a meaningful relation, such as sentiment, shared tradition or convention

[3] The eight month Trelawny Town War of 1795-1796 was a conflict that paled in comparison to the previous war in terms of scale and was a catastrophic defeat for the Trelawny Maroons in particular (they were deported from Jamaica) and the prospects of a renewed Maroon resistance struggle in general (see Campbell, p.209-249)

(Dower, p.25). As applied to a social philosophy, communitarians deny the existence of obligations outside the defined group and would therefore tend to reject the principle of solidarity and universalist consciousness; in other words, communitarianism engenders an "us first" mentality.

I will briefly investigate some mitigating factors that may have informed the Maroon acceptance of the treaty terms noting that without the direct testimony of Maroons alive during those days this path of investigation will be limited. A few scholars have offered their theories: Mavis C. Campbell (p.31) suggests that perhaps Cudjoe and many of his Maroons were simply war-weary and longed for an end to the fighting, even at a steep cost, while Alvin O. Thompson (p.295, 316) argues that guerrilla warfare in such conditions was an ultimately unsustainable activity, especially given the military resources of the slave states, which could count on other colonies or the mother country for reinforcements. While the Maroons almost certainly did consider their difficult military situation when choosing to make peace with the British, I propose that a communitarian ethical outlook was of paramount importance to Maroon decision-making in those critical moments.

At face value it seems puzzling that after fighting so adamantly for their own freedom the Maroons would aid in the denial of it to people who were in the exact same position they themselves were once in. Historical analysis illustrates that in the early days of the Jamaican Maroon War, long before the treaties, the group that would become the Windward Maroons seemed quite content to keep to themselves in the as-of-yet unsettled areas of Jamaica, only lashing out in their militant manner after expanding settlements encroached on their territory (Campbell, p.33). In fact the early Windwards were so notorious for their bad treatment of the runaways that tried to seek refuge in their community that some slaves were reported to have gone back to the plantations, preferring to live with their masters over the Maroons (Patterson, p.258). It was only after the Maroons were trespassed by the colonists and were experiencing shortages of arms and basic necessities that they took a kinder disposition toward the slaves (ibid.).

Similarly, the attacks against the plantations were not necessarily for the purpose of ending slavery, although the liberation of slaves was a result of these assaults. In order to sustain their guerrilla war the Maroons needed to raid plantations for arms, sustenance, and to maintain or increase their numbers, particularly through the taking of enslaved women for procreation. Unfortunately none of the literature examined in this study appears to deal with the issue of consent in these situations. Further research is needed.

Beyond returning runaway slaves as per the treaty terms, the Maroons were known to keep them as well (Campbell, p.198-99). Furthermore, any children sired with their slave women took the status of the mother (Dallas, p.126-27). Even when the Maroons could have joined one of the many slave revolts that happened in the years between the treaties and emancipation, they still chose to remain loyal to their agreement with the colonists. Note the Maroon assault on the rebels of the St. Mary slave revolt of 1760 in Jamaica, in which the Maroons took their agreement with the colonists seriously enough to hunt down and kill Tackey, the revolt leader (Edwards, p.242-44). In order to understand how a communitarian ethic could have come about amongst the Maroons I will now examine their lore and mythology.

The oral history of Jamaica's Maroons gives us some striking clues. Kenneth Bilby (p.247-8) reports that the Maroons see themselves as a "chosen people", with God granting them the super-human ability to put up the tenacious fight they did against their enslavement. Furthermore, the Jamaican Maroons describe themselves as separate and even somewhat spiritually opposed to the descendents of the slaves, whom they call "the Other Side of People" or *Obroni* (ibid., 291). Campbell also speaks of the Maroon disdain for the slaves (Campbell, p.204). In the Maroon creation story there is a myth that Nanny, the celebrated chief sorceress of the Windward Maroons and "mother" of all Maroons, had a sister (the "mother" of the rest of Afro-Jamaica) who accepted her lot in life as a slave thus making her an object of contempt in the minds of the Maroons (Bilby, p.110-111). The mentality that non-Maroon Africans "chose" to stay in slavery is evident in their oral traditions (Campbell, p.204). Since Maroon spirituality preached Maroon exceptionalism, and spirituality gave the Maroon leadership its

ideology and courage in the face of the colonists, it is of little surprise that a "chosen people" mentality would inhibit any sense of solidarity with the *Obroni* (Campbell, p.3-4). This schism still exists today.

As for other possible schisms, Eugene D. Genovese (p.36) argues that the Maroons were primarily concerned with restoring an African past whereas the increasingly revolutionary creolized Africans wanted full emancipation. The "Africanness" of the Maroons and the increasing creolization of the slaves was thus another source of tension between the two groups (ibid., p.54). Genovese (ibid., p.55) also argues that Maroons in general cared primarily for their own autonomy and illustrates his point by citing the case of the Haitian Maroons during the revolutionary period who allied with the whites and Afro-Europeans to wage war against the recently freed blacks who were trying to solidify their authority. The Maroons did this out of a wish to protect their autonomy from *any* centralizing power, even a black revolutionary one.

It is important at this point to note the dissent against the treaties within the Maroon ranks and evidence that the leadership was out of step with at least some of their populace. Cudjoe had two of his officers executed and another two banished for rebelling against the treaty and attempting to spark a slave uprising (Patterson, p.273). I will further examine that case shortly. It is also known that Windward chief Quao only begrudgingly signed the treaty from a position of strategic weakness and after having been threatened by Cudjoe. It is rumoured that Nanny also disapproved of the 1739 treaties, although like Quao, she was forced to concede (Thompson, p.305). Yet, even though dissension to the treaties did exist to one degree or another amongst the Maroons, it remains unclear as to the rationale behind that dissent. Was it a solidarisitc dissent born out of a yearning for all Africans to be free of bondage? Was it distrust of the colonists? The war involved trickery and deceit and some Maroons may have feared that peace negotiations were simply some kind of ruse. Indeed the treaties involved the stationing of European officers in the Maroon settlements, a situation that must have seriously unnerved individuals who had fought merciless battles against the colonists for much of their lives. Was dissent against the treaties a matter of honour? Nanny had reportedly vowed to fight the colonial enemy to the death and was enraged at the prospect of

having to break that vow (Bilby, p.262). There is a Jamaican Maroon tale of the warrior Ojedu (alias Opong, Kwaku or Welcome) who was so embittered by the peace treaties that he left his people forever (which may be an allusion to suicide). In fact the legend of Ojedu may refer to whole groups of Maroons rather than a single person (ibid.). Given the horrors of the slave system, and the fact that many Maroons and their loved ones were themselves tortured and brutalized by the enslavers, cooperation with the Europeans must have been an agonizing choice for many of the warriors.

The likeliest case of solidaristic opposition to the treaties, suggesting the existence of a desire for a unified struggle of all Africans against slavery was the case of Cudjoe's rebel commanders who rejected the treaty by attempting to ferment an island-wide revolt in response to it (Patterson, p.273). It stands to reason then that a mix of distrust, honour and solidaristic opposition to slavery added fuel to the discord surrounding one of the most momentous choices in Maroon history. The above examples suggest that while a communitarian ethic did exist, it was not all-encompassing and stood in conflict with a more solidaristic ethic, which may have indeed prevailed if not for communitarianism being a particularly prevalent characteristic of Cudjoe's leadership. In spite of this, it is worth noting Genovese's (p.57) paradox that even though the Maroons essentially accepted the slave system, thereby inhibiting revolutionary action among the slaves, they simultaneously sent "revolutionary shock waves though the slave quarters" by exposing the lie of European racial superiority through the example of their very existence.

I will conclude by quoting the astute observations of the Brazilian historians João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes (Andrews, p.225) on the subject of Maroon resistance:

> Let them be celebrated as heroes of freedom[;] but what we celebrate in this volume is the struggle of men and women who, in order to live in freedom, weren't always able to act with the certainty and coherence normally attributed to heroes.

Bibliography

Andrews, George Reid, 2000. Review of liberdade por um fio: história dos quilombos no Brasil. *Journal of Social History, 34(1)*, p.224-227.

Bilby, Kenneth M., 2005. *True-born Maroons*. Gainesville (FL): University Press of Florida.

Campbell, Mavis C., 1988. *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: a history of resistance, collaboration & betrayal*. Granby (MA): Bergin & Garvey.

Carey, Bev, 1997. *The Maroon story*. Gordon Town (Jamaica): Agouti Press.

Dallas, R. C., 1803. *The history of the Maroons, from their origin to the establishment of their chief tribe at Sierra Leone*. 1st vol. London: Longman.

Dower, Nigel, 2007. *World ethics: the new agenda*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Edwards, Bryan, 1796. Observations on the disposition, character, manners, and habits of life, of the maroon negroes of the island of Jamaica, and a detail of the origin, progress, and termination of the late war between those people and the white inhabitants. In Price, Richard, ed. *Maroon societies: rebel slave communities in the Americas*. Garden City (NY): Anchor Books, 1973, p.230-245.

Genovese, Eugene D., 1979. *From rebellion to revolution: Afro-American slave revolts in the making of the modern world*. Baton Rouge (LA): Louisiana State University Press.

Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, 1998. *Black rebellion: five slave revolts*. NY: Da Capo Press.

James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. 1963.

Patterson, Orlando, 1973. Slavery and slave revolts: a sociohistorical analysis of the first maroon war, 1665-1740." In Price, Richard, ed. *Maroon societies: rebel slave communities in the Americas*. Garden City (NY): Anchor Books, 1973, p.246-292.

Price, Richard, 1973. Introduction: Maroons and their communities. In Price, Richard, ed. *Maroon societies: rebel slave communities in the Americas*. Garden City (NY): Anchor Books, 1973, p.1-31.

Price, Richard, 1983. *To slay the hydra: Dutch colonial perspectives on the Saramaka wars*. Ann Arbor (MI): Karoman Publishers, Inc.

Price, Richard, 1988, ed. Introduction. In J.G. Stedman. *Narrative of a five years' expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Baltimore (MD): Johns Hopkins University Press.

Thompson, Alvin O., 2006. *Flight to freedom: African runaways and Maroons in the Americas*. Kingston (Jamaica): University of the West Indies Press.