Historiographical Interpretation of Maroon Resistance and Culture in the Atlantic World

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The desire to escape from slavery is easily understood and has most likely existed for as long as the institution of slavery has also existed. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, enslaved persons in the Atlantic World occasionally escaped and formed communities that existed on the fringes of, and occasionally even alongside the slave-holding communities. These communities came to be known as maroon communities. The name came from the Spanish "*cimarron*", which was a term originally used to describe escaped cattle.¹

There are many examples of these communities organizing resistance. In one historiographical interpretation, these activities were the precursor to revolutionary insurrection aimed at the emancipation of slaves within the community. One of the most well-documented revolutions attributed to maroon activity occurred in the French colony of Haiti at the end of the 18th century. Similar uprisings also occurred in Jamaica, Barbados, and many of the sugarcane colonies throughout the Caribbean colonial holdings of the European empires. The Stono Rebellion of Kongolese slaves in South Carolina in 1739 could also be cited as another possible revolt which was caused at least in part by a desire to create a maroon colony which would, in time, lead to general emancipation and liberation. Despite the maroon slaves' involvement in these fights for independence, a closer examination of maroon culture and generalizations across several maroon colonies in the Spanish, French, and British colonial worlds demonstrates that the primary goal of maroonage was in fact, self-preservation. Self-preservation and individual liberty is a more accurate historiographical generalization for maroonage than viewing it as an altruistic attempt to preserve their culture or some greater liberation of enslaved people of African descent within the Atlantic world.

¹ Tim Lockley, Runaway Slave Colonies in the Atlantic World (2015).

In order to assess the probable motivations of maroon colonies, one must first understand the characteristics of maroon colonies in general. Long-term success was rare for maroon colonies, but there were notable and numerous exceptions.² Part of this has to do with the fact that maroonage took place in just about every part of the world in which slavery existed, so while most colonies lasted less than two years, the large number of more permanent settlements can be attributed to the very large number of attempts. It is also important to delineate between maroonage and slaves who have simply run away.

Lockley identifies three basic characteristics that are vital when discussing the differences between an escaped slave and a maroon. The first and most easily identifiable feature of a maroon in a historiographical context was the intent of the escaped slave to remain away from the plantation forever.³ Slaves frequently ran away from their plantations for a myriad of reasons, and many runaways had no intention of remaining escaped forever. Reasons for running away included socialization, trading with slaves on neighboring plantations, or visiting family or spouses who lived on different plantations. Most of these runaways would return within several days of their own volition. The French may have identified these short-term absentees as *petit maroonage* but from a historiographical context, they are better considered to be runaways.

Once the maroons had escaped with the intent to say away forever, Lockley identifies the second defining characteristic of maroonage to be the establishment of an autonomous communities.⁴ An effective geological barrier was absolutely vital to the continued existence of the maroon colony, and was a defining characteristic of almost every colony, and certainly a

² Patrick J. Carroll, Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827, (1977), 493.

³ Tim Lockley, Runaway Slave Colonies in the Atlantic World (2015).

⁴ Ibid.

defining characteristic of all of the successful ones.⁵ One maroon colony in Antigua failed quickly due to the lack of an area of suitable remoteness on that particular island.⁶ Conversely, a small Mexican maroon colony, Mandinga, survived due to the remoteness of its location. The local government attempted numerous times to apprehend the maroons, eventually even attempting to construct a roadway into the interior to better facilitate the capture of the maroons that were located there. The pure economical drain of having to expend so many resources to capture a relatively few number of slaves eventually led the colonists to abandon their attempts to capture the maroons, and the colony remained outside of European control.⁷ The maroon colonies in Jamaica and Surinam were also very remote, most of them barely accessible to people on foot.⁸

In North America, maroon colonies tended to be located in large swamps which were also difficult to traverse.⁹ The maroon colonies in North American swamps tended to be closer to their original place of escape, but the topography still played a key role both in the formation of a maroon colony, as well as its long-term success. A maroon colony in South Africa actually existed within view of the Dutch Cape Town colony for almost a century but was not considered to be a significant enough threat to be worth dealing with, but this colony was a rare exception to the typically isolated maroon settlement.¹⁰

The remoteness of these permanent or semi-permanent settlements created vast problems for maroon colonies which placed a high demand on their adaptive skills.¹¹ The same

⁵ Hilary Beckles, *Creolisation in Action: The Slave Labour Élite and Anti-Slavery in Barbados, (*1998), 109.

⁶ David Gasper, Runaways in Seventeenth-century Antiqua, West Indies, (1979), 9.

⁷ Carroll, Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827, 497.

⁸ J.D. Lenoir, Surinam National Development and Maroon Cultural Autonomy, (1975), 310.

⁹ Tim Lockley and David Doddington, *Maroon and Slave Communities in South Carolina Before 1865*, (2012), 127-128.

¹⁰ Nigel Worden, Slavery at the Cape, (1984), 226.

¹¹ Gasper, Runaways in Seventeenth-century Antiqua, West Indies, 9.

geographic obstacles which ensured that the whites would have difficulty getting to the maroon colony also made trade with outside groups difficult for maroons. Maroons regularly engaged in economic exchanges with pirates, merchants, and even various European groups. Despite these exchanges, having enough land that enabled maroon colonies to grow their own crops was also a key factor in the longevity of the colony. Many maroon settlements have been shown to have had significant amounts of agriculture which also enabled them to subsist with minimal outside interaction.

In addition to remoteness, another factor which contributed to the success of maroon colonies was the existence of various other groups which could pre-occupy the colony's primary threat. Every potential cultural, social, or political clashes gave the maroons one more way to exploit those differences in ways that could benefit the colony. Maroon colonies thrived in situations where they were able to use these disagreements by becoming a useful ally to one or both sides.¹³ In this regard, maroons and their accommodations with various European groups was very similar to that of the Iroquois and other North American Indian groups.

The third and final characteristic of all maroon colonies and people according to Lockley was their tendency to fall into either a hinterland or borderland classification. ¹⁴ These two characteristics had a very large bearing on the size, culture, and goals of the maroon colony. Even colonies which existed within several miles of European civilization could be successful, but normally those colonies were very different from hinterland maroon colonies.

¹² Terry Weik, The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas: Resistance, Cultural Continuity, and Transformation in the African Diaspora, (1997), **82**.

¹³ Tim Lockley, Runaway Slave Colonies in the Atlantic World (2015).

¹⁴ Ibid.

Maroon colonies were normally small, with a typical colony being less than 100 people. The Mandinga colony consisted of about 28 people. A Leeward Islands colony in 1687 was estimated to contain no more than 50 people. Archeological records place the general size of maroon colonies throughout the Atlantic World as small as 5 people and as large as 5,000. It was quite exceptional for a maroon colony to grow beyond the size of 100 people, and even more exceptional for it to number around 500. The ability to provide for large numbers of people and a skewed sex demographic were the primary limiting factor in the size of maroon colonies.

The overwhelming number of maroons were men. Due to their relatively small numbers, women were an important, if underrepresented demographic in every slave colony in the New World, regardless of race, and maroon colonies were not an exception to this generalization. The Mandinga colony had only three women present in their colony, all of whom were the wives of three other maroons at the time of their escape. ¹⁹ The failed Antigua maroon colony had a slightly higher ratio of females to males, but still had only 10 women to 17 men. ²⁰ The low availability of women was a defining characteristic of maroon interaction with outside groups, as gaining women in raids or through purchase as slaves was a highly desirable outcome for maroons.

Often times, maroon colonies were formed out of necessity, and therefore were a combination of ethnic groups.²¹ Compatibility frequently meant something very different from similarity culturally, as necessity often created somewhat strange alliances. Even maroon

¹⁵ Carroll, Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827, 496.

¹⁶ Gasper, Runaways in Seventeenth-century Antiqua, West Indies, 7.

¹⁷ Weik, The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas, 82.

¹⁸ Ibid, 82.

¹⁹ Carroll, Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827, 497.

²⁰ Gasper, Runaways in Seventeenth-century Antigua, West Indies, 9.

²¹ Ibid, 9.

colonies that began with generally similar ethnic groups would accommodate as many new recruits as would fit into their increasingly blended society. There were examples of ethnic exclusion of certain groups at certain times, but these also were the exception rather than the rule. The original maroons in Jamaica were slaves that had been left by the Spaniards when the British took control of the island.²² The British then imported new slaves from different regions of Africa. These slaves would have been culturally and ethnically very different from the existent maroons, but the advantage of having a large number of able-bodied men capable of defending the fledgling societies was a powerful enough motivation for maroons to attempt to overcome their differences in order to cooperate and ensure their continued existence.

Maroon colonies, out of necessity, took on a militaristic social identity and hierarchy in almost every case. Since seclusion was of paramount importance, it was critical that the leaders of a colony were able exercise strict control over their colonies.²³ ²⁴ The seclusion of most maroon colonies made it possible for a relatively small number of men to successfully defend their colonies against attack by slave catchers, plantation owners, and small bands of white militia. The maroons, who were much more familiar with the approaches and territory would exploit their knowledge of the land in ways to give them and advantage.

Lenoir claims that maroonage was fundamentally an attempt by slaves to preserve and maintain their own distinctive cultural identity in the face of slavery.²⁵ This has been a common historiographical interpretation and serves well the general assumptions that have led to oversimplifications of the complex realities of the slave trade and its impact on the Atlantic World. Before recent scholarship has begun to reveal a much more complex view of slavery and

²² Barbara Kopytoff, Jamaican Maroon Political Organization: The Effects of the Treaties, (1976), 87.

²³ Kopytoff, Jamaican Maroon Political Organization: The Effects of the Treaties, 90.

²⁴ Lockley, Maroon and Slave Communities in South Carolina Before 1865, 132-133.

²⁵ Lenoir, Surinam National Development and Maroon Cultural Autonomy, 308.

the interactions between different groups of slaves, the general assumption had been to see slaves as culturally similar, defined primarily by race and the shared experience of slavery. In many ways, the cultures that included slaves and maroons were transcultural in nature and reflected a constant struggle between so many different ethnic, social, and cultural groups that the entire society was constantly in flux. Maroons added a subset of a subset to these nuanced differences, further complicating the society.²⁶

Rather than being motivated by a desire for the preservation of their culture or race, as suggested by Lenoir, maroons often demonstrated a willingness for compromise and accommodation in the interest of self-perseveration.²⁷ The success of a maroon colony often depended upon the compatibility of the maroons themselves, but the difference between compatible and similar was vast.²⁸ Aside from the pragmatism of being willing to accommodate one another, most evidence is that slaves were able to retain many elements of their religious and cultural practices despite being slaves.²⁹ The practice of African voodoo became common throughout the Caribbean world. Even African slaves who converted to Christianity were able to incorporate many of their own beliefs and practices into their everyday religious experiences. The maroon colony in Palmares even constructed a church.³⁰ Another example in the Leeward maroon colony of Jamaica was that English was made the official language to prevent infighting between maroons over which African language was to be used.³¹ This demonstrated that this particular colony recognized the necessity of integration, rather than preservation of their unique

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²⁶ Kathleen Wilson, *The Performance of Freedom: Maroons and the Colonial Order in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica and the Atlantic Sound*, (2009), **50-51**.

²⁷ David Geggus, Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791, (1992), 27.

²⁸ Carroll, Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827, 490.

²⁹ Geggus, Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791, 30-31.

³⁰ Weik, The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas, 87.

³¹ Kopytoff, Jamaican Maroon Political Organization: The Effects of the Treaties, 88.

cultures. The choices made by many maroons in the cultural and religious practices seem to indicate an open acknowledgement that the plantation colonies were a vast conglomeration of cultures that were constantly influencing one another and redefining one another's cultural norms and practices, and maroons simply played one part in this complex interweaving of cultures. If the religious or cultural domination of the whites was truly the cause of wide-spread maroonage, one would not expect the maroon colonies to exhibit so many distinctly European features.

This is not to say that maroons did not develop their own cultural practices or identities. They were certainly influenced by many different cultures from Europe, Africa and America, but the way they responded to these influences produced a unique subculture, rather than preserving pre-existent ones. The blended culture was an effect of maroonage, not the cause of it, as suggested by Lenoir. Maroon subculture has become a topic of recent scholarship and has been demonstrated to have profound impacts on Jamaican culture³² as well as historical movements such as the Cuban Revolution.³³ Maroons have had a tremendous impact in retrospective historiography as examples of counter-cultural resisters who stood up to the establishment at the time and managed to negotiate their own way in the world.³⁴ In many cases, these interpretations are products of assumptions related to maroon resistance which are at least partially inaccurate and certainly romanticized.

According to Weik, maroonage should be viewed as one of many different possible modes of resistance available to slaves along a continuum.³⁵ At one end of Weik's continuum was slave revolt, while at the other end of the continuum would be the more passive modes of

³² Smithsonian Institution, *Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Cultures in the Americas*, (2018).

³³ Kenneth Routon, Conjuring the Past: Slavery and the Historical Imagination in Cuba, (2008), 635.

³⁴ Erin Mackie, Welcome the Outlaw: Pirates, Maroons, and Caribbean Countercultures, (2005), 24-62.

³⁵ Weik, The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas, 84.

resistance such as strikes and work slow-downs.³⁶ Another possible interpretation, proposed by David Geggus is that maroonage was actually a more passive form of resistance undertaken by many slaves in lieu of revolt.³⁷ Given the established militaristic character of maroon colonies, Geggus's perspective would seem at first to be preposterous and unable to be defended.

However, a possible historiographical interpretation does allow for the possibility that many maroon colonies used violence only when faced with the potential alternative of having to return to a live of slavery. This understanding of essentially self-defensive action places maroonage considerably more toward the passive side of Weik's continuum.

The first fact which must be established in order to resolve this particular question is a definition of terms. Maroonage and insurgency were not two faces of the same coin. This fact is evident in the language of the colonists of the time period. Two uprisings in Jamaica were referred to as the "Maroon Wars." Jamaica experienced a considerable number of slave revolts as well, and that the name of these struggles was different proves that the Jamaican and British government saw their opponents as different. Most other rebellions and slave revolts are also referred to as such would seem to continue to support the understanding that maroon uprisings and slave uprisings were different.³⁸ In a proclamation regarding what would become the slave rebellion leading to the Haitian revolution, George Bruce referred to the rebels as "gangs of slaves" not as maroons.³⁹ Bruce did not seem to be concerned at all about the possibility of maroon activity in St. Domingue. His proclamation, which never mentioned maroons as a potential threat, was much more concerned with outside European intervention.⁴⁰ During the

³⁶ Weik, The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas, 84.

³⁷ Geggus, Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791, 28.

³⁸ Beckles, Creolisation in Action: The Slave Labour Élite and Anti-Slavery in Barbados Caribbean Quarterly, 121.

³⁹ George Bruce, *Proclamation made by Commander in Chief in response to the New Year's Day rebellion. Dominica,* 1791, (January 20, 1791).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

same period, the French colonists clearly distinguished between maroons and insurgents, showing that they also did not view them as equivalent to one another.⁴¹

Maroon communities thrived during times of unrest and instability, and often sought to exploit or even create chaotic circumstances in order to better suit their own needs. Maroonage in South Carolina before and after the American Revolution happened most frequently and successfully during times of internal conflict, such as the French and Indian War, and the American Revolution. American Revolution. Maroons regularly harassed the colonies that were near them, but they did not just harass or steal from whites. Maroons regularly harassed any group that was nearby in an attempt to supply their colony with goods that they were unable to make for themelves. In some cases, women were even the targets of theft, as the men of the maroon colony attempted to even the demographical inequity of sex by kidnapping or purchasing female slaves. For the most part, this is the best example of active recruitment on the part of maroon colonies, which typically did not go to plantations in an attempt to free large numbers of enslaved people. The supplies necessary for continued existence were of the highest priority to maroons, far above any kind of goal of liberation or freedom.

The harassment and guerrilla tactics of maroon groups also served to discourage the European settlement of land closer to the maroon communities. As has been previously established, maroon communities depended greatly on the remoteness and inaccessibility of their communities. By carrying out periodic raids and attacks on outlying colonial posts, the maroons were able to stall or in some cases completely halt expansion into areas that would have

⁴¹ Geggus, Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791, 26.

⁴² Lockley, Maroon and Slave Communities in South Carolina Before 1865, 130.

⁴³ Carroll, Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827, 488.

⁴⁴ Lenoir, Surinam National Development and Maroon Cultural Autonomy, 311.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 311.

⁴⁶ University of Miami Digital Collections, *The Maroons*, (2018).

eventually led to heightened conflict. Conflicts did arise from time to time, and as a result of the guerilla raids and militaristic nature of their society, the maroon chiefs and former slaves themselves were able to apply their knowledge of tactics during the revolts, such as the one on St. Domingue.⁴⁷ This should not be confused to be taken as a statement that maroonage was a key contributor to the slave uprising in the French colony. In fact, the rate of maroonage had actually been reduced for several years, and careful analysis of the slave uprisings shows that most maroons either remained uninvolved in the conflict completely, or in some cases actually fought with the British or French in an attempt to gain official recognition of their freedom.⁴⁸ However, it does acknowledge that maroons played a part in slave uprisings, either as the instigators or by allying themselves with one or the other side. Maroons did not always take the side of the enslaved people in these revolts.

Many maroon colonies can be said to have been effective in gaining independence for themselves. At the end of the Jamaican Maroon Wars, the British negotiated a peace treaty with the two main maroon groups on the island. While these negotiations did lead to the eventual confinement of the maroons to a specific region, it also was successful in maintaining the existence and freedom of the community.⁴⁹ This was not always the case, as many negotiations turned out to be temporary in nature, but the continued existence of many maroon colonies, as well as the large number of examples of cooperation between European and maroon colonists seems to suggest that even if negotiation was not the primary or preferred vehicle to gaining a semblance of autonomy, it was a way. These negotiations were in many cases mutually

⁴⁷ Geggus, Marronage, Voodoo, and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791, 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 46

⁴⁹ Kopytoff, Jamaican Maroon Political Organization: The Effects of the Treaties, 100.

beneficial, as numerous attempts at controlling maroonage through legislation had failed throughout the Atlantic World.⁵⁰

Maroon cooperation with the whites also serves to debunk the interpretation that they were attempting to build a rival community which would inspire insurrection and eventually lead to the liberation of all blacks within the community and the abolition of slavery. To the contrary, maroons and slaves often had competing goals, and in many ways were seen by one another as rivals more than allies.⁵¹ Since much of the primary source material regarding this matter is through the interpretative biases of European or Creoles, it makes sense that they may have mistakenly linked the concepts of liberty and abolitionism to maroons, given their underlying assumptions that all slaves were essentially similar to one another. However, maroons were often invaluable allies for plantation owners in assisting with the return of other slaves, as the maroons proved to be quite adept at slave catching.⁵² Not only this, but in Palmares, there is evidence that the maroons actually owned slaves themselves.⁵³ In some cases, maroons incited slave insurrections, not to attempt to revolutionize the status quo, but rather to create the chaotic environment necessary to cause the planters to temporarily suspend their attempts to defeat the maroon colony.⁵⁴ According to one colonist, the slave insurrection on Barbados originated in the interior of the nation.⁵⁵ The maroons often used slave revolts as sacrificial pawns in order to buy time and create conditions which helped their own community thrive, at the expense of the slaves themselves.

⁵⁰ Gasper, Runaways in Seventeenth-century Antiqua, West Indies, 12.

⁵¹ Lockley, Maroon and Slave Communities in South Carolina Before 1865, 134.

⁵² Kopytoff, Jamaican Maroon Political Organization: The Effects of the Treaties, 96-97.

⁵³ Weik, The Archaeology of Maroon Societies in the Americas, 87.

⁵⁴ Gasper, Runaways in Seventeenth-century Antiqua, West Indies, 6.

⁵⁵ Edward Codd, Letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, (April 25, 1816).

Maroon colonies required the highest possible level of adaptability in order to maintain their own existence. Maroons had many tools at their disposal in order to achieve this end, and most exhibited a willingness to go to any length necessary in order to preserve their own individual freedom. They were certainly willing to sacrifice racial equality in order to maintain that freedom, and in many cases, they had little or no qualms with slavery as an institution. The only problem that most maroons appear to have had with slavery was on a personal and individual level. Maroon communities were somewhat exclusionary, and, in some cases, they even sent away individuals whose views were incompatible with the group's goals, but the goals of the group were defined broadly enough to incorporate people of many different cultures. The plantation system was not a threat to their religious practices, and many maroon communities actually incorporated European religions and names even decades after they had liberated themselves.

Maroonage was primarily a consequence of the brutality of slavery. Larger communities and higher numbers of maroons were to be found in places like Jamaica and Surinam where the laws were especially harsh.⁵⁸ In reviewing some slave punishment logs, it becomes evident that men were punished much more harshly than women, which can help explain why maroon colonies were overwhelmingly male.⁵⁹ For example, male slaves often received the death penalty for offenses that women did not.⁶⁰ As a consequence of slavery and its brutality, the primary and overriding goal of maroonage was to remain outside of the slave system on the level of the individual. These individuals cooperated with one another in order to achieve these goals,

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⁵⁶ Smithsonian Institution, *Creativity and Resistance: Maroon Cultures in the Americas.*

⁵⁷ Lockley, Maroon and Slave Communities in South Carolina Before 1865, 133.

⁵⁸ Tim Lockley, Runaway Slave Colonies in the Atlantic World (2015).

⁵⁹ Court records from Dominica, a British colony in the Leeward Islands (January 1814).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

leading to the creation of maroon communities. Maroons were willing to sacrifice most, if not all that they had in order to maintain their freedom once they had obtained it. The cultures of the communities which were created were products of this desperate balancing act for the maintenance of self-preservation, rather than as the cause of maroonage as some historians have asserted.

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