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Archaeology and the Maroon Heritage in Jamaica

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Of all the fascinating aspects of Jamaican history, the Maroon element appears to be the only one that weaves through the whole period, including the present day. Referring to themselves as 'True blu chankofi piti bo', some Maroons of Moore Town in the parish of Portland claim that, with the exception of the freedom fighters of South Africa, they are the only living genuine and most honourable freedom fighters worthy of the name.

Another interesting feature of the Maroon element in Jamaica is that it provided a testing ground for British colonial tactics and also for their economic and political policies. In addition it demonstrated the colonial government’s perception of freedom and human dignity, for freedom to the British at the time was a phenomenon that was applicable only to themselves. Maroon guerrilla warfare had its origins in the struggle for freedom that has characterized the greater part of their history. In the eighteenth century the Maroons amazed the whole world by their unimaginable feat of resisting the supposedly invincible British army to the point of military stalemate, thus forcing the government to negotiate a peace treaty.
At the time of the British conquest of the island in 1655, it became clear that the escapees, as the Maroons were considered to be, were a force to be reckoned with. Apart from the burden of the increase in the number of black slaves after the conquest and the attendant complex organization necessary to maintain control, the colonial power quickly recognized that the 'runaway' communities were a legacy that was to determine or significantly influence the course of events. From the time of the return of King Charles II to the throne in 1660 to King George III in 1795, and beyond, the British had to grapple ceaselessly with the desperate efforts of the plantation slaves to free themselves and the simultaneous struggle of the free Maroons to maintain their hard-won liberty.

It is now clearly recognized that the Maroons of Jamaica provide a cultural link between the so-called prehistoric 'Arawaks' and the Spanish on the one hand and the British on the other. It is this connecting function of the Maroon heritage in Jamaica that makes their history outstanding, forming as it does a continuous and permanent feature of the history of the island itself. This element also makes the overseas history of the colonial and related European nations more interesting and meaningful.

It would be unfair to state that historical references to the Maroons are few. However, these references fail to examine the Maroon past as a cultural history. In the main, emphasis is limited to the role of the Maroons as 'rebels' implying that they did not have the right to fight for freedom and human dignity. Only a few years ago it would have been inconceivable to mention Maroon heritage as a study falling within what is known today as 'Historical Archaeology'. It is now considered to be not only part of this sub-discipline but also the most important element as far as Jamaica is concerned.

The First Nanny Town Expedition

In 1973 an exploration society in cooperation with the Institute of Jamaica organized an archaeological expedition to Nanny Town. It lasted only a few days. Led by Tony Bonner as the site director and Allan Teulon as the historical adviser, the expedition conducted a test excavation of a limited section of the military fortifications at the Nanny Town site. Working mainly on the surface around the rectangular military wall, members of the expedition recovered fragments of tobacco pipes, musket balls, gun barrels, buttons, green glass bottles, and several pieces of metal objects such as nails, knife blades, staples and spear-heads. The most spectacular find was a large stone with an engraving recording that the British forces had captured the site from the Maroons at the end of December 1734 and briefly occupied it up to July 1735. However, after this expedition, there was not much archaeological activity at any Maroon site for
some years. In fact, it is only very recently that the homelands of the Maroon heritage have seen a systematic archaeological investigation.

It was gradually realized that any study of the culture and settlement patterns of the Maroons requires more than mere determination of the location, number, size and spatial distribution of the sites which they occupied. Such a study must also go beyond the perception that limits Maroon history to 'a history of rebels'. For example, it is important to identify the functional role of a site, such as seasonal occupation. Political, economic and social ties existing among and between sites are important factors that should be considered. Also necessary is an understanding or reconstruction of the Maroons' movements and interaction and of the information flow among themselves and with outsiders.

UMARP and Recent Investigations

With the establishment of the University of the West Indies, Mona, Archaeology Research Project (UMARP) the Maroon settlements were brought into entirely new focus. The first phase of UMARP (1987-89), was a general study aimed at identification and location of historical sites in Jamaica. The second phase, which started in 1990, narrowed down to the coverage of Maroon settlements.

The main objectives of the UMARP study of Maroon settlements are (a) to obtain archaeological data that can be used for the interpretation of the sociocultural patterns of the behaviour of the Maroons; (b) to determine the factors that contribute to the location and character of Maroon settlements; (c) to obtain material for dating and providing a chronological framework for the origins and development of Maroon heritage in Jamaica. The overall objective is to identify the character and mechanism of the functional adaptation of Maroon societies in Jamaica over time.

A reconstruction of the Maroon past must also be done in the context of the territories they occupied and the special and changing features of these areas over time. For example, the Cockpit country in western Jamaica with its remarkable but harsh geomorphology of tropical karst and vegetation was the scene of some of the Maroon wars. It was these wars which established the Maroons' reputation for extraordinary military and organizational abilities. How did they cope with the environment? What mechanisms enabled them to overcome the harsh conditions from the social, economic, technological, and military points of view? It is important to identify the character and mechanisms of their functional adaptation through time.

Seventeenth to nineteenth century maps exist that indicate the approximate territories occupied by the Maroons at different times. It is with the aid of these maps that archaeological reconnaissance and surveys can identify Maroon dwelling sites, guerrilla war camps, hideouts, burial and battle grounds and military tracks. Several of these maps indicate the limits as well as the changing nature of the settlements which were occupied. From other maps can be gleaned information as to the distribution of the Maroons within the settlements. A 1757 map of Accompong in western Jamaica and an 1842 sketch map of what was formerly known as Trelawny Town (Maroon Town) are useful for a study of the patterns of family distribution within those settlements. A study of the social relationships and the development of families would reveal factors that are crucial to an explanation of the nature of the mechanisms by which the continuity of Maroon cultural practices has been maintained until the present day. It would, therefore, be possible to trace the evolution of modern social networks and behaviour patterns of Maroon societies. Information on these is minimal in colonial documentation, the only main source of Maroon history.

Place names in areas inhabited by Maroons at one time or another, like those of other groups of people elsewhere, are very useful for archaeo-
logical research and reconstruction. Such names as Parade, Gun Hill, Lookout Point, Kinda, Bathing Place, Pette River Bottom, Watch Hill, Gun Barrel, Nanny Town and Killdead are a few examples of such useful names. In some of the modern Maroon towns there are sections or divisions that appear to have associations with family groupings over time. In Accompong, for example, family names can be associated with specific areas in the town, although it is claimed that there is no formal agreement to such a pattern of distribution or association.

Another area of study that is currently being pursued is the technological contributions of Maroons in Jamaica. A study being undertaken by Dr Candice Goucher of Portland State University is providing evidence on an eighteenth century iron and brass foundry established by a John Reeder at Morant Bay in St Thomas which used the technological skills of Maroons and slaves of African descent. Technological continuities from the background of their places of origin in Africa would provide additional insight into how the Maroons would have coped with the conditions in which they found themselves in the New World.

Distribution of Sites

Maroon sites have been identified in the Juan de Bolas area of the Guanabo Vale and in the hills above [see maps]. These sites are referred to in historical documents as the earliest of the runaway hideouts and areas of resistance. More than any others, these settlements are likely to provide evidence that they do link the prehistoric period with the historical since within this same area is the Mountain River Cave with its important Amerindian rock art.4

The Accompong area in the Cockpit country of St Elizabeth [see maps] abounds in sites. Some of them are the Peace Cave, Gun Hill, Pette River Bottom, Big Ground, Grass Parade and Kinda. North of Accompong, a path leads through a modern cattle pen to the north of Kinda and descends a very rugged hill down to the burial ground of Kodjo, the popular Maroon leader who organized the Maroons in a series of guerrilla battles in the early eighteenth century. East of this burial site is an area referred to as Big Ground Grass. To the south of Big Ground Grass, the area is bounded by a stream which flows into the Black River in the direction of Aberdeen. The famous cave where the peace treaty of 1739 was signed between the English and the Maroons is located at an intersection on the track linking Accompong to Aberdeen. The Peace Cave overlooks the Pette River Bottom where the last battle between the two parties may have taken place. Near Maroon Town, formerly Trelawny Town, north of Accompong, are graves apparently of British soldiers. On top of Gun Hill immediately to the north again are some archaeological features supposedly built by the British forces during their wars against the Maroons.

In eastern Jamaica, in the Blue Mountain region, many sites have been identified, some still with building foundations. Brownsfield, Gun Barrel, Watch Hill, Marshall's Hall, Killdead and Nanny Town are but a few of these. Together with other similar sites they are located in almost inaccessible areas around Windsor, Seaman's Valley, Moore Town and Comfort Castle, all in the parish of Portland. The environment of the sites is usually fragmented by the surrounding mountains and the deep valleys of the Rio Grande, the Negro River, Dry River, Stony River and their tributaries which cut through the territory. The thick vegetation in the area has caused considerable disturbance at many of the sites although these conditions have also sheltered some of them. Landslides and other natural land shifts together with battle damage during the period of Maroon resistance appear to have changed the face of many of the sites.

Marshall’s Hall, also noted elsewhere as Marches Hall,5 is located near Comfort Castle in Portland close to the Dry River. The site is interesting because of its structural features and also for the fact that Maroon oral tradition links the site to the modern Maroon capital town, Moore Town, historically considered to be ‘New Nanny Town’. Surface finds consist of eighteenth and nineteenth century European ceramics, house foundations and steps. The site partly overlooks the valley of the Jackmadoree, a stream which flows into the Dry River. Settlement on the site of Marshall’s Hall is said to have been in family units, each family occupying specific sections of the site. More studies are envisaged in the near future.

The Brownsfield site, near the Snake River near Alligator Church Bridge, Portland, sits high on a hill that overlooks the road skirting modern Brownsfield. The main features are remains of houses, with a few fragments of ceramics and green glass bottles on the surface. The Brownsfield and Marshall’s Hall sites are significant because they appear to support the speculation that they were established by the Maroons for defence.

The site that has attracted much attention is Nanny Town. Since January 1991, it has seen a series of reconnaissances and surveys and as well as a full scale excavation.

The Nanny Town Site

Accessible only by hunters' trails or by air, the site of Nanny Town is strategically located within the loop of the Stony River which marks its southern and eastern boundaries. Blocking off the Stony River and rising steeply from its northern bank is the Abraham Hill. Northwest of the site is Nanny Hill from which Nanny Falls splashes down to the level open grounds to flow into the southwestern bend of the Stony River marking the boundary on that side of the site.

It is not exactly known when Nanny Town was founded, but historical references indicate that by the mid-eighteenth century, the town was not only fully-fledged, but also a stronghold of the freedom-fighting Maroons in the eastern part of the island. Though certainly a principal settlement, Nanny Town’s extent of control over other towns is not known.

Oral Traditions

Nanny Town was named after the legendary Grandey Nanny who is also documented as having been a small, wiry woman with piercing eyes. She is said to have had exceptional military ability and social as well as political leadership qualities. It is sometimes tempting to suggest that Nanny Town may have been an amalgamation of a number of smaller settlements. The British forces which seized and briefly controlled the area seem to have had little interest in the settlement and, therefore, did not provide much information on it. Molly’s Town, Dina’s Town, Marshall’s Hall, Killdead and Watch Hill are some of the names of ancient Maroon sites mentioned in the
oral traditions of the Maroons and in some documents as lying in close proximity to or within the general area of the Blue Mountains where Nanny Town is located. Some, if not all, of these settlements may have had direct connection with Nanny Town. What were the actual relationships between these settlements? What was the mechanism of their functional adaptation at those times? What was the nature of the social network that enabled them to establish the strong resistance characteristic of the history of the Maroons? These were some of the questions that lay behind the decision for UMARP to undertake a full-scale archaeological expedition to the ancient site of Nanny Town and adjoining areas.

The 1991 Nanny Town Archaeological Expedition

For the first time, as a result of the UMARP initiative, the University of the West Indies was undertaking a full-scale archaeological survey and excavation of the ancient site of Nanny Town. The difficulty of the terrain made it necessary to plan the enterprise in three stages. First was a preliminary trip to determine the most manageable route; this was followed by a pre-excavation trip to study the site in order to prepare a pre-excavation differentiation of Nanny Town and other sites in the vicinity; the third phase was the excavation itself.

Preliminary trip: Since the Nanny Town site is so difficult to reach, a preliminary trip was undertaken in January 1991 in order to identify a possible route to the site from the nearest town. Mr Leopold Shelton, assisted by Garcia and Clinton West, was the guide. Two possible routes were identified, one leading from Windsor and the other from Coopers’ Hill, both in Portland. Either route would require a hike of at least twelve hours to reach Nanny Town. The Windsor route was selected as being slightly less difficult.

The Windsor Route: From Windsor Primary School the route runs southwards for about two hundred metres and then turns eastwards to the banana boxing shed known as Black Gate, about a kilometre away. It is very close to the west bank of the Rio Grande River which can be crossed by a fording or by raft. The trail continues westward through Parks Hill along an abandoned water pipe-line to Rose Hill, a very muddy and slippery three-to-four kilometre hike. Another kilometre takes the journey to Garland Grove, Pumpkin Hill and Mammea Hill to the north. Much of the way from Windsor up to Garland Grove runs through the rugged Johns Hall district. Two kilometres further on is the Corn Husk River which is crossed at a point called ‘White’. Here the easier part of the journey ends and the first major turn is made southwards towards the site of Gun Barrel, three kilometres away. This part of the journey can be accomplished in two to three hours but it is a very rugged, slippery, steep and winding trail. Gun Barrel is approximately halfway to Nanny Town from either Windsor or Cooper’s Hill.

Travelling southeast past Sweat Hill, Pipe Hill, Hog Grass Bump and Hand Dog Bump, crossing numerous streams, struggling through many gaps and climbing steep slopes, one gets the true feeling of the rain forest in which the Maroons lived. Nanny Town is at
approximately the same altitude as Hand Dog Bump, but one has to descend Gun Barrel to a spot close to Hand Dog Bump then move on northwards to a base camp used by hunters of the area, located south of Abraham Hill. By skirting the hill to the west and crossing back and forth a couple of times over the Stony River, one finally gains access to Nanny Town just north of Abraham Hill.

Pre-Excavation Expedition: This part of the second phase of the UMAR project took place in February 1991. It was sponsored by the Department of History of the UWI at Mona and the Archaeological Society of Jamaica (ASJ). It was fully supported by the Jamaica Defence Force, with contributions from members of the expedition. Thirty-three persons, some from the United States of America, made up the expedition.

The main purpose was to identify excavation areas. Pre-excavation site differentiation was based on surface distribution of artefacts and other surface features. Four areas were selected and the results of soil chemical analysis are expected to throw a clearer light on the validity of the differentiation, which for the moment is used only tentatively.

Excavation: In the following August, the full scale archaeological survey and excavation of the ancient site of Nanny Town took place. UWI student volunteers, lecturers, members of the Archaeological Society and Jamaican high school teachers, Maroon guides and hunters, as well as undergraduate and graduate volunteers from various universities in the United States of America, camped near Nanny Town for four weeks from August 5, 1991, for the historic excavation.

The Site: As already indicated, the Stony River and Pitter's River and their tributaries dominate the drainage pattern of the site, while Abraham Hill to the south and Sugar Loaf to the north-northwest dominate the topography. Rocky and rugged, the Nanny Town site and adjoining areas are engulfed in thick, lush green vegetation. The site enjoys the warming sunshine coming through the gap between Abraham Hill and the Sugar Loaf Hill.

A conspicuous feature at the site is a rectangular stone structure believed to be a military fortification built during the British-Maroon wars. A large block of stone near the stone structure is inscribed with a message that the site was taken and controlled for a brief period by a Captain Brook. This engraved stone appears to have been tampered with by more recent military personnel as an additional name has been found engraved on it since the August 1991 expedition. A third feature is a more recent stone slab, measuring 27cm by 35cm, with the engraving 'Bermuda Regiment 1971'.

The excavation was based on a three-metre grid which was imposed upon the 10 feet grid used by the expedition of 1973. The J4 line which was the J3 of the 1973 expedition was used as the datum point. The excavation was conducted according to natural levels and reached only Level 2 in more than 80% of the area excavated and Level 3 in a few areas, particularly in the eastern sections of the site from which much of the material that appears to predate the Maroon period of settlement of the site was derived.

Finds: The provisional field inventory of the finds at Nanny Town indicates that approximately three thousand artefacts were recovered. More than 33% of this total consisted of fragments of green glass bottle, 15% of local ceramics and 10% of metal objects. An interesting feature of the finds is their variety.

Historic Phases: Nanny Town is recognized as having seen three phases of occupation. The first appears to predate the Maroon presence in the area, and includes a mixture of local ceramics, stone artefacts and shell material. In areas 4 and 5 particularly, this phase is represented by artefacts that have been provisionally referred to as pre-Maroon and which some of the participants in the expedition think might be 'Arawak'. No date can yet be assigned to this phase although it is strongly suspected to pre-date 1655.

The second phase, provisionally referred to as the Maroon phase of occupation, contains ceramic material, much of which is local grinding stones and a considerable amount of charcoal which, if dated, could probably facilitate our understanding of the relationship of this phase to the others. Much of the charcoal comes from levels that contain plenty of ashy layers on surfaces that appear to have been trampled upon or beaten down. Fragments of gun flints, gun barrels, musket balls, iron nails, green and clear glass bottles together with one fragment of red clay
The Maroons, as is usually pipe bowl, are finds from the Maroon phase. The composition of the material from this phase makes it difficult to distinguish it from the later phase which appears to represent the period when the British forces attacked and occupied the site. In addition to the finds already mentioned, the Maroon phase, like that of the phase that followed it, contained kaolin pipe-stems and bowls, implements such as surgical scissors, buttons, a coin (Dutch or Spanish origin), a glass bead, fragments of imported ceramics and fragments of gun barrels.

The third phase is represented by the stone fortification and the engraved stones. The main finds of this phase include many pipe fragments, buttons, fragments of gun barrels, medicine bottles, nails, imported ceramic bowls, plates and cups, buckles, and a large quantity of green glass bottle fragments. A few post holes at the site are associated with this phase. One of them appears to represent the location of a flag post, possibly erected by the British forces. This hole, approximately 1.5 metres deep and lined with stones, is located against the back wall of the stone structure.

Discussion

Although no dates are yet available for the phases identified, the results are very interesting because they raise many issues that suggest that there is a need to begin to rethink the standard interpretation of the history of Jamaica. The new evidence clearly confirms that Nanny Town was a stronghold that saw considerable military action. A striking discovery is that this evidence seems to suggest that Nanny Town was occupied for a fairly long period, possibly dating back to a time before colonial contact was made. This possibility becomes even more attractive if the speculation that the artefacts thought to be perhaps prehistoric or 'Arawak' is confirmed. In this case, one could further suggest that Nanny Town might have been a stronghold or a refuge for escapees during the Spanish period and that those escapees could have been members of some of the indigenous groups that the Spanish encountered on their arrival in the island. It could also be the case that some of the indigenous inhabitants who might have already settled at Nanny Town before the Spaniards arrived eventually welcomed and sheltered fugitives during both the Spanish and the English periods. If we assume that the prehistoric group consisted of 'Arawaks', it would suggest that the very first escapees were 'Arawaks'. Would that mean that the first Maroons were 'Arawaks'? Possibly.

Another conclusion that follows from this is that the association between the material of the first two phases suggests that a few of the 'Arawaks' who might have escaped into the least accessible regions of the Blue Mountains and similar areas were still there at the time when the English drove the Spanish from the island. Books on the history of Jamaica would then have to correct the erroneous impression that the 'Arawaks' had all been exterminated by the Spanish. It appears from the evidence from Nanny Town, pending the dating results that prehistoric groups in hideouts in remote areas of the island might have been gradually absorbed into the groups that later joined them.

Material associated with the stone structure at the site of Nanny Town clearly supports the opinion that it was not built by the Maroons, as is usually claimed in their oral traditions. The structure may have been used later when the Maroons took over the site again but only after the British had left Nanny Town.

Not much can be said about other questions such as the relationships between Nanny Town and other known Maroon settlements in the vicinity of the site or in other parts of the island, nor about the social network that might have bound them in any relationships. It is also premature to speculate on the structural pattern of the settlement because not much of the site has yet been examined. Whenever much more information about the physical nature of Nanny Town and other Maroon sites becomes available it should be possible to attempt serious generalizations on the character and mechanisms of the functional adaptation of the Maroons over time.

The results of the 1991 excavation appear to present a new opportunity to achieve a better assessment of the Maroon heritage within the general history of Jamaica. The University of the West Indies archaeological research programme is continuing with further excavations and it is hoped that more evidence will be obtained which will make such a reassessment possible. Much, however, remains to be done.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

This paper is a preliminary summary of archaeological investigation into Maroon settlements in Jamaica and includes aspects of excavations conducted in the summer of 1991 at the ancient site of Nanny Town in the Parish of Portland, Jamaica. I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Department of History Research and Publications Fund Committee and the faculty of Arts and General Studies, all of the University of the West Indies at Mona, the Jamaica National Heritage Trust, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Jamaica Defence Force for their support. Limited space makes it impossible to mention individual names of members of the February 1991 Nanny Town Expedition which was organized with the support of the Archaeological Society of Jamaica and the Department of History, Mona, or the foreign and local undergraduate and graduate volunteers and Maroon guides involved in the Summer 1991 excavations which went so very smoothly. I wish also to place on record the cooperation and assistance of Colonel C.L.G. Harris, Chief of the Moore Town Maroons, and his elders, and Colonel Martin-Luther Wright, Chief of the Accompong Maroons, and his elders. The study has so far been a family affair and I am hopeful that we will continue to keep the family alive and growing.

1. This is a Maroon expression roughly meaning 'I am a full-blooded descendant (son/daughter) of a Maroon.' It is an expression of identity and reaffirmation of solidarity and loyalty, usually called into play when two or more Maroons meet and exchange greetings. It clears the way for the discussion of matters that should remain within Maroon circles.


Photographs taken by the author.

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