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REDEFINING MAROON HERITAGE IN THE NEW WORLD STUDIES

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Abstract

Evidence from recent archaeological studies appear to suggest a redefinition of the heritage of runaway slave communities, referred to by the name Maroons and other terms. Now properly defined as the pioneer freedom fighters, it is also becoming clear that their heritage is a single constant strand in that of the New World. Contrary to previous views and descriptions which appear to indicate that these communities derived only from African slave escapees, historical and archaeological evidence from the Caribbean, and the Americas now reveal that the heritage of Maroon communities stemmed from the united force forged by between native American communities and Africans. Consequently, the suggestion must be made that calls for the redefinition of the status and role of these «small-scale» societies (the Maroons) in the making of its heritage . The major aspects of Maroon heritage which provide the context for redefinition include their composition, distribution, role of Amerindians in marronage and also through the analysis of the material culture, the features which Maroon heritage shares with the rest of the New world heritage. It is concluded that a new definition will help to explain, more objectively, the nature, context and mechanism of the functional adaptation of Maroon communities and their role in the formation and transformations that led to the achievement of freedom and human dignity in the New World.

INTRODUCTION

Recent archaeological and historical studies in the Caribbean have re-ignited high interest in the reappraisal of the contributions of «runaway» societies in the diaspora to the material culture of freedom-fighting societies in the New World heritage (Agorsah 1993, Arrom and Arevalo 1986, Laguerre 1989, Price 1973, Singleton 1994, Weisman 1989). In marronage, one of the most effective methods of resistance in the New World, could be found the best examples of the contributions of small-scale societies to freedom-fighting and the achievement of respect for human dignity. The Maroons were fighting while on the move. The guerrilla lifestyle, did not prevent them from using their good knowledge, ingenuity and hardiness to live off the rough environments in which they found themselves. In many such environments certain cultural cores which profoundly regulated their military partnerships and harmony. They fought the colonial forces relentlessly to a military stalemate and forced treaties that ensured their freedom and co-existence. In the process, the Maroons forged new behavior patterns and identities, developed new alliances out of the great diversity as well as carried forward many aspects of cultural heritage of their social, political, art and artistic expressions characteristic of their original roots. A major achievement of recent studies (Agorsah 1993, 1994, Weisman 1989) is that new avenues of explanation are being opened up that will provide the material context for the whole

process of cultural exchange and adaptation of these groups who came from several different parts of the world and were also divided by great differences in language and cultures. Whereas studies and considerable analysis have been conducted on historical and ethnographic evidence (Bilby 1992, 1994, Campbell 1988, Craton 1982, Price 1976), the archaeological evidence has received very little or no attention. As a result knowledge about the formation and transformation processes that created Maroon settlements, their sizes and spatial behavior patterns, family networks, political systems and many other aspects of early related cultural traditions is limited. The Maroons were considered simply as «rebels» The gaps to be filled by the new evidence that is coming to light are quite wide. Consequently, there is the need to redefine some of the major aspects of Maroon heritage such as their composition, distribution, role of Amerindians in marronage and also through the analysis of the material culture, identify features that Maroon heritage shares with the rest of the New world.

DISTRIBUTION AND COMPOSITION OF MAROON SOCIETIES (Fig 1)

The distribution map of Maroon communities is the first aspect of Maroon heritage that needs to be redefined. Maroon settlements, ancient and modern, are known to exist in eastern and western Jamaica, Suriname and French Guiana (Price 1976). Others include the Palenqueros of Colombia, the Palmares in Brazil, the Garifuna of the Atlantic coast of Central America (Belize), the Maroons of the Costa Chica region of Mexico (Price 1973), the Cimarrones of Cuba (Barroso 1984, Pereira 1990), the Dominican Republic and Haiti (Arrom and Arevalo 1986), and the Blue Hills of the central province of the Bahamas, Maroons of St. Vincent and St. Lucia, St. Thomas (Carnegie and Patterson 1989), the Black Warriors of the Seminole of USA (Oklahoma, Texas), Maroons of Mexico in the Costa Chica de Guerrero area, the Moskitos of the Honduras, Maroons of Mount Misery of St. Kitts, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Grenada, Shekerly Mountains of Antigua, St. John and St. Christophe. Evidence is becoming available that there were many more such small scale communities in the New World than has been known. In 1795, a slave revolt in Guyana in Dutch Demerara took place in conjunction with Maroons; in the Blue Hills of New Providence in the Bahamas armed runaways were known to be operating in 1787; the 1765 rebellion in Belize is known to have been caused by escapees from Jamaica while at the same time widespread maroon activity was occurring in Grenada. These are a few of the events hardly considered as part of the process of freedom fighting that eventually paved the way toward the end to slavery in the New World. Similarly the Black Warriors of the Seminole in North America were also vigorously struggling against colonial forces for survival. For example, in the geographical region of British North America (that is much of modern United States of America) more than fifty Maroon settlements, many of them probably very small, were known to have been established between 1672 and 1864 (Aptheker 1943). Maroon societies can also be found in Canada (Halifax and Nova Scotia) and in Sierra Leone (West Africa). The very life of all these groups revolved around fight for freedom.

A new distribution map of Maroon activities in the New World therefore, is a new definition at a first glance and provides us with a truer picture than we have ever realized. The fact of its widespread distribution is linked to its composition. Some examples will explain that Maroon societies were not composed of only African runaways. Archaeological and historical data on the Seminole Maroons and Maroons of Jamaica, Mexico and Suriname and Colombia support the view that the earliest freedom fighters in the New World consisted of combined forces of Amerindian groups and Africans and not only Africans as many have been made to think. This introduces the second area of redefinition of Maroon heritage. Recent historical analysis of the survival of the Seminole Maroons (Wright 1990, Thybony 1991, Mulroy 1993) and recent archaeological evidence from Northern Florida (Weisman 1989) and the historical evidence on early Jamaican Maroons (Bryan 1971, Dallas 1803) and archaeological evidence from the Blue Mountains of Jamaica (Agorsah 1993, 1994) provide strong support to the proposition regarding the importance of the union partnership between Amerindians and Africans right from the very beginning of the formation of Maroon societies.

Archaeological Sites

Many of the Maroon areas mentioned above (Fig.1) abound in archaeological sites that need exploration: Suriname, Haiti, Cuba, Florida (USA) and Jamaica Maroon sites testify to the abundance of sites awaiting study. Archaeological studies of Maroon settlements in some of these places appears to be pointing to the need to re-define the material culture, role as well as Maroon heritage as a single constant thread that runs through New World history.

Black Warriors of the Seminole

When the Maroons escaped from South Carolina and Georgia in the 17th century and sought refuge in Spanish Florida into their hideouts, they established good relationship with the indigenous groups who came to be known later as Seminole Indians. They struggled together until a final peace settlement which recognized their freedom. They are now divided among Oklahoma, Texas, the Bahamas and the northern Mexican state of Coahuila. Together with their Indian allies, these Maroons were deported to Oklahoma after the Seminole wars and some of them later moved to Mexico where they are referred to as Negroes Mascogos. A century later some of them again moved back to Texas where they were engaged to serve as a special military unit or border guards called Seminole Negro Indian scouts.

The heritage of the Black Warriors of the Seminole may be linked with many sites known in the Florida peninsular (Fig. 2) particularly Boggy or Wahoo (now considered to be Kettle Island and the site of Pilaklikaha (Weisman 1989). Many other sites such as Paynes Town, Cuscowilla, Lattchaway, Talahasochte and Oven Hill and in the Gainesville area, Fort king near Ocala, Roles Town and Spaulding's Store near St. Augustine and Powells Town, Newman's Garden, Wicki Wachee, Nicholson Grove, Fort Brooke and Opauney's Town all in the south could reveal archaeological material on African continuities among the Maroons of that area. Brent Weisman (1989) who has conducted archaeological research in the area concedes that the identification of ethnicity and related features in the available evidence is still far from reality

Maroons of Haiti

The Bahoruco mountains in the Haitian parish of Vallieres on the Mulatto bluff near the river of that name was one of the earliest (as early as 1522) (Price 1976) hideouts of Maroons in the Caribbean. Sites with names such as Peak of Blacks, Peak of Darkness, and Crest of Congos and sites on the Tarare mountain in the parish of Saint-Louis de Nord, relate to the African element at those Maroon sites (Laguerre 1989). In 1777 the attacks of the Maroon chief Canga and Gillot also known as Yaya in the mountains in the parish of Trou is referred to as very devastating. Also on record are the sites of Morne Mantegre near the village of Tannerie between the Grand Reviere and Lamonde in the parish of that name, sites in the hillock of the parish of Mirebalis, the mountains of the parish of Grande Anse and in the district of Plymouth, this last name being taken after a Jamaican escapee to Haiti in the late 1700. The role played by Maroons in the Haitian revolution that earned Haiti the first Black Republic in the New World was in fact a continuation of the fight for freedom that had been pioneered some two centuries earlier. Descriptions of these sites by Laguerre (1989) need to be backed up by more archaeological investigations (Fig.3).

Maroons of Jamaica

Maroons of Jamaica are well known because of their long struggle with the British colonial authorities. These communities are now located around the main towns of New Nanny Town (Moore Town) and Scott's in the east, and Accompong in the west of the island of Jamaica (Fig.4). Archaeological evidence (Agorsah 1992, 1993, 1994) indicates that the nucleus of the Maroons in the east consisted of various groups who lived in the inaccessible areas of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica before or, certainly during, the period of Spanish domination when a large number of slaves escaped into the hills. Documentary evidence (Morales 1952, Bryan 1971) indicates that in the early 16th century, the Spanish government attempted to flush out some of the slaves who went into «marronage» (flight) into the Blue Mountains where they had established themselves. One of the areas known to have been settled by the earliest Maroons was the Guanaboa Vale in the Juan de Bolas hilly areas located in the modern parish of St. Catherine generally consisting of the area between modern towns of Linstead and Chapelton including the Ginger Ridge, Pindars and Marlie Hill areas which are dominated by the Rock River drainage system.

Another settlement referred to as Los Vermmajales generally in the Juan de Bolas mountain area has also been mentioned and described (Campbell 1988). Names of Maroon sites such as Parade, Gun Hill, Watch Hill, Lookout point, Kindah, Bathing Place, Pette River Bottom, Gun Barrel and Killdead are mentioned in Maroon oral traditions (Agorsah 1990, 1991) and some have been located. In the Scott's Hall area (Fig. 4) is a site referred to as «Konkonsa Ceitful», «Ceitful» being a shortened form of «deceitful». According to oral tradition all Maroons accused of various crimes especially for circulating false information, were tried at that place. «Konkonsa» is an Akan (Ghana) word for a liar, falsifier or deceitful person. Nanny Town, one of the major strongholds of the maroons of eastern Jamaica has seen the most extensive excavation. A main features of the site include stone structures considered to be military fortifications. Another site that has seen serious archaeological study in Jamaica is the Seaman's Valley site located on the fringes of the Blue Mountains near the modern town of Moore Town and on hillsides overlooking the Rio Grande and Negro Rivers. This site is significant because it is one of the few know Maroon battleground/ sites where the Maroons came into direct and open combat with colonial forces who were totally defeated.

Suriname

Maroons of Jamaica

More Maroon sites are known in Suriname than any other Maroon region but none has been archaeologically studies although a considerable amount of studies has been carried out at Suriname prehistoric and other sites. Some of the sites (Fig. 5) include Kosey, Kromantibo, Kofi-hay, Gado-Sabi, Makamaka, and Kormanti-Kodjo-gron, all in the Aluku maroon area near the coast and in the basins of the Commowijne, Cottica and Marowijne rivers. Others include Pakapaka and Pikin-Pakapaka in the Matawai Maroon area, and the Saramaka site of Papa. The site of Buku, thought to be one of the most important Maroon sites cannot be clearly identified and so have many of the sites in the newly built hydroelectric power dam area in central Suriname disappeared following the dam construction. These continue to be threatened by the expanding Lake. Hoogbergen (1991) has been able to identify and placed on map, many of these sites.

It is impossible to develop this list at this time to cover all Maroon regions of the New World: Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Colombia and the numerous other places in the New world. Clearly, this indicates a need for a redefinition of the place of Maroon heritage in new World Higman (1994) has stated that «Maroons have never been marooned in the sense of being lost, cast up in some isolated, desolate place, without networks to the wider world. They have always been in the world and of the world. Acceptance of this past and present interactive relationship is essential for the future preservation of Maroon heritage as well as the study of Maroon peoples and their history». Archaeological study of Maroon sites will eventually become a major aspect of the hope of the preservation and redefinition of the Maroon heritage.

Owing to the constant need to fight back slavery and to maintain independence, many of the Maroon settlements would obviously have been semi-permanent or destroyed and rebuilt several times over, perhaps leaving very little archaeological evidence. Archaeologists must bear this in mind in their search for or identification and determination of boundaries and sizes of Maroon sites. How much reliability one can place on the historical records on Maroon populations is also a question that needs to be seriously addressed. The size of Maroon sites appear to lie anywhere between .5 and 3.5 acres (Agorsah 1993, 1994). This is not only because the Maroons were «marooned» in rough, rugged and inaccessible and concealed areas but perhaps because it was impossible for them, in a guerrilla lifestyle to congregate in large numbers.

Some questions are: Who went to the mountain regions during those days of Maroon struggles in Jamaica or Suriname or other places, to take census of Maroons? What were the mechanics of counting the warriors who were constantly on the move?

Linked to the demographic speculations about the Maroons is the erroneous notion very popular in many history books about the New World and particularly the Caribbean, about the extermination of the Amerindians before enslaved Africans were brought in. Archaeological evidence from Jamaica indicates that the Maroon stronghold of Nanny Town previously thought to be completely composed of African escapees, was established earlier and occupied by the natives on the island who escaped the Spaniards during the Spanish period and until as late as 1668, before they were later joined by escapees of African descent (Agorsah 1993, 1994).

A factor that links the evidence of the distribution, composition, role of native groups and the partnerships in freedom fighting together is the fact that Maroon heritage has been a main constant strand in the entire process of their responses to changes occurring at the time.

There is also a reason for the call for a re-definition of the name « Maroon » which even when used as a noun has, most of the time, never been written, with a capital «M» by many scholars, a measure of the prevailing scholarly mentality until now. It is clear that the existence and the cause of the heritage is authentic/ real and should be accorded the due recognition. While it is inconceivable to get away with the word «British» with a small «b» it has been very acceptable to write Maroon with a «m», although both refer to clearly identifiable groups of people or societies. Fortunately this is changing and only a few conservatives will maintain the old usage, some on frivolous linguistic grounds.

SOME GENERALIZATIONS:

The issues of composition, distribution and demographic speculations about Maroon societies will be crucial issues to consider in future interpretations of archaeological evidence in the Caribbean. How is the Caribbean archaeologist going to work this into future research strategies that will provide objective analysis of the heritage of the entire New World cultural area? The large volumes of ethnographic and historical documents on the Maroons still require supporting archaeological material that will give us the opportunity to explain the nature and mechanism of the functional adaptation of Maroons in the period of their pioneering freedom-fighting. But one thing is clear, and that is, that evidence so far indicates that Maroon heritage was not formed in isolation nor was it simply one of those events that could be ignored in New World heritage. In addition the distribution of Maroon activities demonstrates a true model of common approaches of small-scale societies in freedom-fighting and restoration of human dignity. It also manifests maroonage as a common New World cultural experience. There is also the need to emphasize the individual experience (American, African etc) as a cultural component of a heritage without which New World History is incomplete. This is where the redefinition will clear the way for an objective assessment of the heritage of small-scale people. Individually considered, the issues of composition, distribution, role of the individual groups, and material culture are broad issues by themselves that require considerable and sustained research attention, particularly from Archaeologists. It is expected that issues generated by the discussion of this paper will bring up other related issues that may need considerations similar to those already mentioned. The ideas expressed in this paper should certainly prepare us for onerous archaeological study of Maroon sites that is going to be our major pre-occupation in the next few years to come. It is in the light of this that the paper may contribute constructively to redefinition of our goals for the future challenges of researching Maroon heritage and its place in the New World.

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Figure 1 : Maroon settlements in the New World



FIG. 1

MAROON SITES ON NORTHERN FLORIDA (USA)

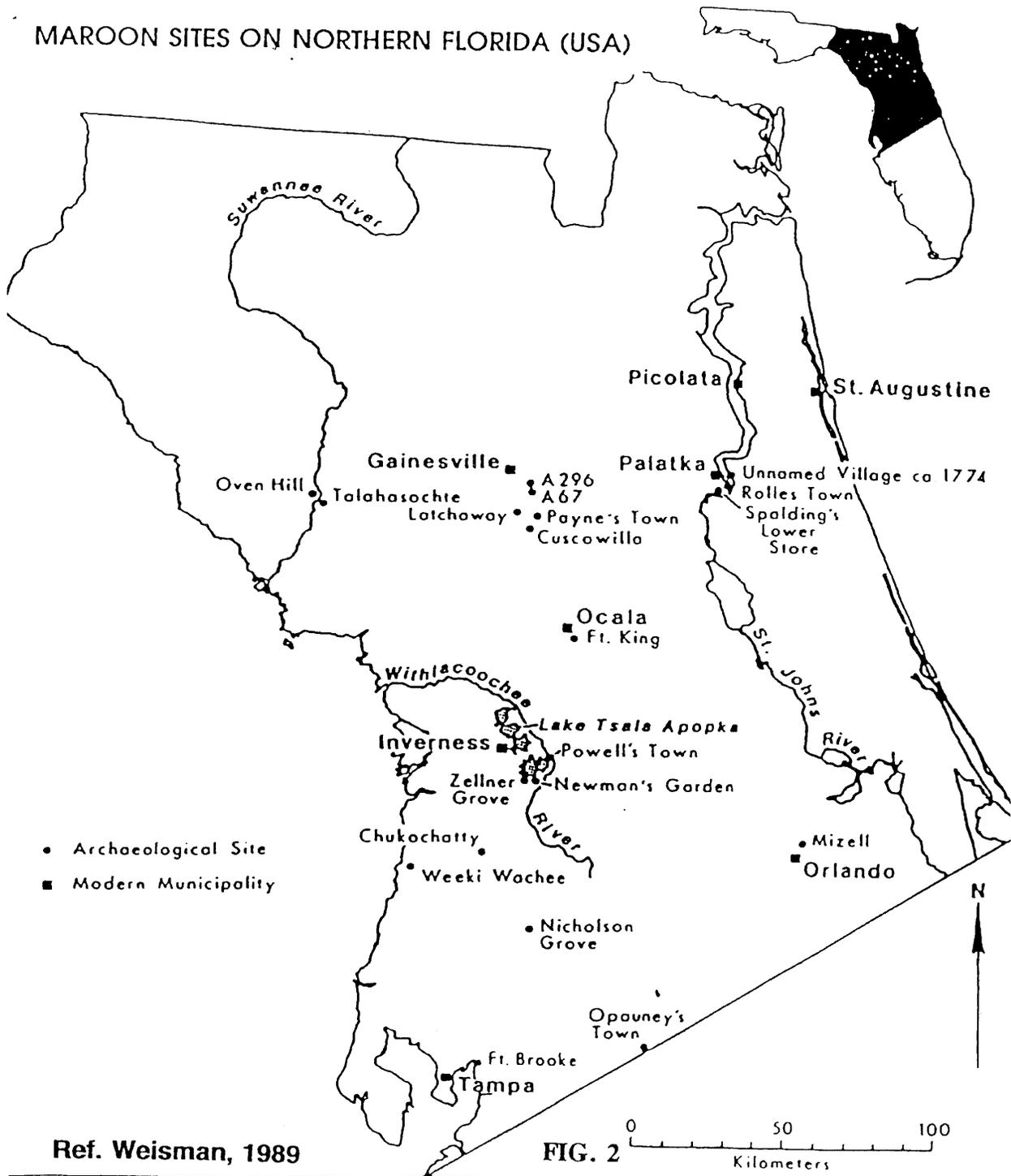


Figure 2 Maroon settlements in Northern Florida (Ref. B. Weisman 1989)

THE MAROONS OF JAMAICA

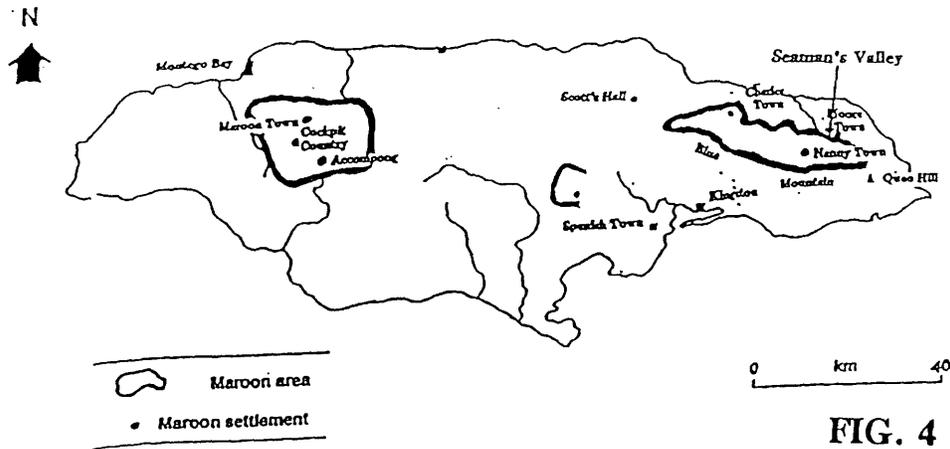


FIG. 4

