FACT SHEET ON THE HISTORY OF THE MAROONS OF JAMAICA

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During the period of plantation slavery throughout the Americas, enslaved Africans who had managed to escape banded together to form their own communities. In the Caribbean, Central and South America such groups were referred to as Maroons and today, Maroon communities exist not only in Jamaica, but in Suriname, Brazil, Louisiana in the USA, Mexico and Panama.

THE ORIGINAL MAROONS

- Enslaved Africans arrived in the island of Jamaica in 1533 when the Spanish Crown granted permission for 300 slaves to be imported into Jamaica.
- The first Jamaican Maroons were former slaves of the Spanish. The earliest set comprised runaway Africans who retreated to the thickly wooded interior parts of the island.
- These Spanish ex-slaves eventually formed three groups - one under the leadership of Juan de Bolas in the Guanaboa Vale region, a second under the leadership of Juan de Serres in the Vera Ma Hollis region of upper Clarendon, and a third believed to be located between the Clarendon Plains and Porus, Manchester.

ARRIVAL OF THE BRITISH

- In 1655, the British, under Admiral Penn and General Venables, invaded the island and the Spanish eventually withdrew in 1660. A number of the enslaved seized the opportunity of this invasion to escape into the foothills of St. Catherine and Clarendon, while a few were deliberately set free by their masters when their masters were forced to withdraw.
- There was an estimated 600 Spanish ex-slaves in the island at the time of the withdrawal of the Spanish in 1660.
- In 1663, the British made an offer of land and full freedom to every Maroon but this was ignored by all except de Bolas and his party. The Juan de Bolas group (which comprised about 150 Africans) were rewarded with grants of land, and de Bolas was made Colonel of a black regiment of militia. He later joined alliances with the British in hunting the other two Maroon groups.
- Faced with increasing pressures from the British, the other two bands withdrew towards the uninhabited, mountainous north-western section of the island where they formed the nucleus of the later emerging Windward Maroons.
ORGANIZED GUERRILLA WARFARE

- The newly established Maroons continuously harassed the English settlers and raided their plantations for supplies, arms and women; set fire to the fields; and stole the cattle and stock. Over time, their numbers increased as they were joined by enslaved Africans who fled the plantations of the English.
- In their battle for survival, the Maroons developed extraordinary skills in guerrilla warfare, much to the bewilderment of their European enemies. The Maroons were very adaptable and mobile warriors who took maximum advantage of their environment to strike and withdraw rapidly. They made extensive use of ambush to catch their adversaries in crossfire and fought only when and where they chose. They communicated with fellow Maroons by means of the ‘talking drums’, the blowing of the abeng, and through their secret language which contained many words from the Akan language.
- In 1673, approximately 200 slaves, most of whom were Coromantee, rebelled, escaped from the plantations, and retreated to the mountains bordering Clarendon, St. Elizabeth and St. Ann. These groups formed what later became the Leeward Band of Maroons. Similar uprisings from various plantations caused other enslaved Africans to join with the Leeward group and some of these groups sought refuge among the early Spanish Maroons.
- Over time, several Maroon bands were organized under strong leadership. These bands occupied mountainous areas which protected their camps from the incursions of the British soldiers and settlers, their trusted blacks called ‘Black Shot’ and from Miskito Indians imported from Central America, who were brought to track them.

SPLIT INTO TWO MAROON GROUPS

- Eventually, the Maroons split into two main groups - the Leewards and the Windwards – based on their geographical locations. The Leeward Maroons lived in the western end of the island, in the mountains bordering Clarendon and St. Ann, under the leadership of Cudjoe, assisted by his brothers Johnny and Accompong. Cudjoe eventually moved his band to the Cockpit Country in the western parishes where they raided nearby plantations for 40 years, preventing settlement of the interior.
- The Windward Maroons were located in the eastern end of the island and made their homes in the mountains of Portland and St. Thomas. Their greatest leader was Nanny, who was joined by Quao and Cuffee.
- Like the Leewards, the Windwards were worrisome to the authorities. They carried out lightning raids on settlements and quickly took refuge in their mountain abodes. The swift rivers in Portland and the high levels of rainfall made it difficult for them to be pursued. They prevented the expansion of European settlement in the area and the parish of Portland was left virtually unsettled.
THE FIRST MAROON WAR

- The plundering activities of the Leeward Maroons against the British, under Cudjoe, led to the First Maroon War.
- As part of their fighting strategy, the British built barracks, fortified posts with connecting roads close to the main Maroon settlements, and used dogs and Mosquito Coast Indians to track down and fight the Maroons.
- In 1734, Captain Stoddart of the British army led an attack on Nanny Town, high in the Blue Mountains, aided by swivel guns. Huts were blown to pieces and the villagers attacked as they ran, some leaping off the cliffs.
- Nanny Town was completely destroyed. Most of the Maroons who escaped from Stoddart’s attack moved further inland to a new village site, only to resume fighting. Renewed efforts to suppress them, aided even by sailors from warships, had varying success.
- Meanwhile, raids on plantations increased as well as the Maroon victories which encouraged the enslaved on plantations to revolt. The African population outnumbered the white colonists at a ratio of approximately 14:1.
- To control the situation, the British brought in more Miskito Indians as well as companies of free blacks and mulattoes to fight against the Maroons.
- In 1738 British Colonel Guthrie entered into discussions with the Maroon leader Cudjoe with a view to having both parties sign a peace agreement.
THE PEACE TREATIES

- Cudjoe, of the Leeward Maroons, and the British government negotiated a peace treaty in 1739. By that agreement, the Maroons were given their own land, freedom from taxation, and some amount of internal autonomy in their settlements. They were also required to return runaway slaves.
- A year later Nanny signed a separate treaty for her band of Maroons, having founded what is now Mooretown in the Rio Grande Valley.
- Te Maroons were recognized as free and independent citizens and owners of prescribed plots of land. They were left almost completely in charge of the management of their internal affairs, and all judicial procedures except capital punishment could be decided by a Maroon “Colonel”/”Captain”.

THE SECOND MAROON WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

- After the signing of the treaties, the British and the Maroons enjoyed more than 50 years of peace. The Maroons lived quietly in their settlements, returned runaway slaves and helped to maintain British law and order.
- However, the peace treaty did not last forever. In July 1795, the Trelawny Town Maroons rebelled in response to long-held grievances with the British. What sparked the rebellion was the conviction of two Maroons in court for pig-stealing and their flogging by a runaway slave whom the Maroons had previously caught and handed over to the authorities. The authorities failed to placate them and the Maroons rose up in revolt.
- The Earl of Balcarres declared Martial Law and gave the Maroons four days to surrender, or to face attacks and the destruction of their settlements.
- Only 38 surrendered and they were arrested and sent to a prison in Montego Bay.
- This started the Second Maroon War with about 300 Blacks against 1,500 Europeans. It lasted for over five months with General George Walpole commanding the British forces.
- Walpole realised that he was up against a tough enemy and reported this to the governor who decided to take matters in hand and imported 100 dogs and 40 handlers from Cuba to fight the Maroons.
- General Walpole gave the Maroons the chance to surrender, which they took on the understanding that they would not be executed or transported from the island.
- January 1, 1796 was the date fixed for all Maroons to surrender; only 21 Maroons met the deadline, with the great majority surrendering in late January, and a few still in March.
- It was held that the Maroons had broken the agreement by not surrendering on January 1 and those who had failed to do so were shipped to Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- A part of the lands of the transported Maroons were given to the Accompong Maroons and the Second Maroon War ended.
- Except for a short time in 1865 during the Morant Bay Rebellion when the Maroons helped the government to suppress the uprising in St. Thomas-in-the East, they lived peacefully in their mountain settlements.
The location of Maroon communities today is no longer shrouded in secrecy.

The Maroons share their rich heritage with the rest of Jamaica and the world through participation in international symposia and cultural events, and through the publication of research by scholars.

The separation and isolation of these communities has been broken down by intermarriage between the descendants of Maroons and other groups, and by their assimilation into the wider Jamaican society for the purposes of education and work.

The main Maroon communities in Jamaica today are located at Accompong in St. Elizabeth, Mooretown and Charles Town in Portland, and Scott’s Hall in St. Mary.

Each settlement is still governed by a “Colonel (an honorary title dating from the peace treaties) elected by the Maroons themselves, who arbitrates in minor disputes among his people.

The Maroon descendants still retain some of their old traditions, such as the blowing of the abeng. Drums are still used on ceremonial occasions, and the old African myal healing tradition is still practised.
In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) recognised the importance of the Jamaican Maroon heritage to humanity when it declared the Maroon Heritage of Moore Town a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In 2008, the element was transferred to UNESCO’S Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The blowing of the abeng is a traditional Maroon custom still practised today.

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