Captivity among the Maroons of Jamaica in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines the practices of captivity among the Maroons of Jamaica during the early colonial period. In this paper, I argue that the practice of holding people in bondage in Maroon communities, which was strongly influenced by the West African customs of their ancestors, had much in common with the southern Native American nations in the United States before the mid-1800s. Through a comparative analysis, I draw conclusions about the nature of captivity among the Jamaican Maroons almost a century before the first slave was documented in the Maroon census records. I conclude that captives in Maroon villages experienced a range of rights and obligations and even those held in chattel-like servitude had mechanisms for social inclusion.

Key words: Jamaica, Maroon, bondage, captivity, Akan, Native American
Introduction

The term ‘Maroons’ first appears in 1626 in reference to the enslaved blacks who fled from their Spanish captors in Jamaica and created strongholds in the dense forests of island. These runaways established autonomous communities from which they withstood Spanish, and later English, attempts to re-enslave them.\(^1\) On May 10, 1655, the English finally conquered the island of Jamaica from Spanish after a protracted and costly war though they never succeed in subduing the Spanish Maroons. By 1660, the English had accepted the autonomy of Juan Lubola and his band of Spanish Maroons and begun to settle the island.\(^2\)

English militiamen and small farmers initially populated the newly acquired island of Jamaica. However as its potential for sugar production became evident, large-scale sugar plantations developed and an increasing numbers of enslaved Africans were brought to the island to work the sugar industry. The enslaved Africans and their descendants took every opportunity to secure their freedom. By the late seventeenth century, there emerged distinctly English Maroon communities in Jamaica.\(^3\) The Leeward Maroon group arose in the western side of Jamaica following major insurrections in 1673, 1690 and 1696.\(^4\) Meanwhile, enslaved men and women revolted in Guanaboa in 1685 and settled in St. George parish with the Spanish Maroons to form the Windward Maroons.\(^5\)

The population of Maroon villages grew steadily over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and “amounted to some thousands” by the early 1700s.\(^6\) Despite numerous attempts to quash the Maroon villages and re-enslave the inhabitants, the English were unsuccessful at overcoming the military expertise in guerilla warfare of the rebel fighters. Not only did the Maroons repeatedly repel the English militia and elude the Mosquito Indians and dogs brought in to track them, they continued to attack plantations and settlements.\(^7\) In 1739, Governor Trelawny of Jamaica and the leaders of the Windward and Leeward Maroons signed peace treaties in which the colonial government acknowledged the freedom and autonomy that the Maroons had already claimed for themselves in exchange for a cessation of hostilities and an agreement from the Maroons to help quell future slave rebellions and return runaways to their masters.

Captivity among the Maroons

Unequal degrees of freedom existed in the autonomous Maroons communities soon after they were formed. Colonial planters complained bitterly that the Maroons stole slaves from their plantations.\(^8\) While some may have willingly fled the plantation to join the Maroons in the forest, Maroons captured others were for their domestic, agricultural, and military labor.\(^9\) It is difficult to assess the prevalence of bondage even after the census takers begin recording people under the category of slave in 1773.

Even less is known about the experiences of those the Maroons held in bondage. Historically, Maroons were not a literate people, and even as education and literacy expanded into these remote communities, they have continued a rich tradition of
transmitting knowledge through oral narratives. However, accessing stories related to controversial topics such as bondage is challenging. First, secrecy and distrust of outsiders is deeply ingrained in Maroon culture primarily as a result of their initial development in a hostile environment. This circumspection has continued among modern-day Maroons who have had their history and culture misunderstood and misrepresented, particularly by academics. Consequently, knowledge sharing with non-Jamaicans and even non-Maroons has become stymied. Second, present-day Maroons are highly conscious of their depiction in modern society, which affects not only with whom they share information, but also what they share.\(^\text{10}\)

Consequently, in order to draw any conclusion about the nature of bondage among the Maroons during the early colonial period, scholars must use a comparative analysis. In this paper, I argue that the practices governing the rights, privileges, and disabilities of captives among the Maroons of Jamaica, which were themselves influenced by the customs of their West African ancestors, were similar to the southern Native Americans nations in United States prior to the Civil War. I conclude that bondsmen experienced a range of rights and obligations and even those held in chattel-like captivity had mechanisms for social inclusion.

**Comparative Practices**

During the early colonial period of Jamaica’s history, the majority of those enslaved on the island were African-born. Consequently, there is little surprise that many of the original inhabitants of the Maroon communities had been captured in Africa. Although the Maroon population was ethnically diverse, West African, especially Coromantee or Akan, culture was influential in the ethnic identity that emerged in Jamaican Maroon villages. Extensive research on Maroon culture and heritage has already noted the strong cultural ties between the Maroons of Jamaica and Akan-speakers of West Africa. Scholars have noted the connections in the religious practices of Obeah, their musical instruments, particularly the abeng, and in the language.\(^\text{11}\) Thus, an examination of captivity among the Akan-speaking people of the Gold Coast of West Africa, the region of modern-day Ghana, provides a valuable starting point from which to explore the cultural assumptions and practices concerning bondage that informed both Maroon captors and their captives.

In their seminal work, Historian Suzanne Miers and Cultural Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff argue that Western concepts of slaves as chattel and free people as autonomous individual are not applicable to systems of bondage in West Africa. They contended that freedom was understood as unencumbered relationships and full inclusion in the society. Slaves, on the other end of the spectrum were those whose dependence significantly impeded their ability to demand the rights, privileges, and protection of inclusion. There was a great deal of fluidity and, at times, ambiguity between these dependent relationships.\(^\text{12}\) In this theoretical framework, slavery is one form of dependency in a continuum of inter-dependent relationships used to incorporate outsiders into kinship networks. Wives, clients, pawns, and slaves were distinguished in their dependency...
largely by their ability (or inability) to call on their support networks for protection and the intended length of the dependent relationship.

Recently acquired captives were the most likely to suffer in chattel-like working and living conditions. Few ever became free, but they did marry, sometimes into the master’s lineage; have families; and take advantage of opportunities to improve their social and material lives through the system of patronage. Prominent men and women displayed and enhanced their wealth and power through a large assemblage of dependents, which indicated their economic and military strength. Patrons engaged in reciprocal obligations, a means of demonstrating their benevolence, to attract and retain dependents. Consequently, enslaved peoples often worked alongside free and quasi-free dependents at tasks determined by their age, gender, talent, the status of the master and the purpose for which they were acquired. Enslaved women, for example, were employed at the same domestic duties as free women. A captive woman’s level of deprivation, workload, and even her status were determined by a number of factors including her relationship with her master, whether she was born into bondage or captured, and the master’s standing in the community.

The southern nations of Native Americans—Chickasaws, Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Seminoles—also had an ancient history of bondage, including the practice of slaveholding. Likewise, many of the customs related to captivity was similar to those of West Africans, namely a continuum of unfreedom and dependency affecting everyone from kinsmen to slaves; a sense of reciprocity between patrons and bondmen; and social mobility for enslaved peoples. Historians such as Daniel Littlefield Jr., Theda Perdue, Claudio Saunt, Tiya Miles, and more recently Barbara Kraumather and Christina Snyder have shown that captivity, of which enslavement was a form, among the Native Americans was always a dynamic institution. People held captive in Native American villages had a wide range of experiences. Captured enemies and adult males were often victims of ritual torture and sacrifice. Meanwhile others held in bondage experienced a range of levels of inclusion from servile laborer to full adopted kin. In societies such as these that are predicated on inter-dependent relationships, mechanisms for inclusion were central to practices of holding outsiders in bondage.

The strategies employed by Maroon captors to control and exploit labor and those utilized by bondmen to extort rights and privileges were shaped by African-derived cultural assumptions. However, Maroons were also responding to, adapting, and negotiating a specific context that would have made the wholesale importation of African “slavery” not only illogical, but impossible. And thus any attempt to frame bondage among the Maroons simply as a continuation of West African practices falls short of a true appreciation for the dynamic and adaptive nature of Maroon life. Captivity in these autonomous communities rested on the intersection of African originating ideology and specific Jamaican contexts.

Like Native Americans, the Jamaican Maroons were both culturally and racially distinct from the hostile colonial society surrounding them and found it necessary to incorporate outsiders, even slaves, into their villages in ways that the hegemonic white
society did not. Moreover, constructs of identity in both societies emerged within the context of racial chattel slavery.

Scholars of Native American history have studied the ways in which the specific contexts of early colonial society transformed indigenous forms of bondage and their scholarship has been influential in the conceptual framework of this research. In reference to New World societies, historian Ira Berlin stated that “the lines between free and slave, black and white were porous prior to the arrival of sugar.” Sugar, he suggested, was the spark that transformed the region into a slave society. Perdue, Snyder, and Kraumather point to the American Revolution, the Great Migration, and the Civil War as pivotal moments in the shaping of Native American identity and catalysts for changes in captivity among Native Americans. Although Native Americans communities never became full-fledged slave societies they did adapt their practices around bondage to respond to new dangers and take advantage of new economic opportunities. In particular scholars of Native American history note the emergence of transgenerational enslavement of Africans and their descendants.

However, due to military, agricultural and regional differences, the systemization of inherited servitude had already been well established by the 17th century in the West Indies. In February of 1731, Governor Hunter wrote to the Duke of Newcastle in England of testimony extracted from a captured Maroon woman “who [had] been some years with the rebels.” This woman recounted that Maroon raiders had cut the throat of a “negro woman they had carried off from a plantation” and then cut their own throats when pursued by a white militia party. What might have been in store for the slain woman had she arrived in the Maroon town? The cultural context of dependency in conjunction with the chronic shortage of women in Maroon communities led to the rapid incorporation of women into these male dominated societies. Women were invaluable to the long-term success of the village as wives, mothers, and laborers. Whether the women fled to the Maroons on their own, willingly traveled with Maroon raiders, or were captured and forced to the town had the most bearing on their social status within the community. In particular, how formerly enslaved women came to the Maroons indicated her bravery and strength. Women who displayed these characteristics made ideal mates and mothers to the next generation of Maroon warriors.

A woman’s basic duties, however, had less to do with their captive or free status than their gender. In many pre-industrial indigenous societies in West Africa and the Americas, women performed the agrarian and domestic duties. In his examination, Sarra, a Maroon captive apprehended by the colonial militia, told officials that in the windward part of the island, “there is a great deal of open land about it, in which is plenty of coco, sugar canes, plantains, melons, yams, corn, hog and poultry.” Maroon towns relied heavily on hunting and subsistence farming for their survival and women were an integral part of the work force. However, the Maroons did not own the land on which they planted and it was always possible that militia incursions would force them to abandon the fields. Consequently, large-scale farming that would have made the most effective use of enslaved laborers was not feasible prior to the signing of the Maroon Treaties.
The method of their arrival in the village determined the experiences of males in the Maroon towns. Maroons treated the men who fought against them as war captives and as such put them to death or held them in chattel-like forms of bondage. The men who fled to them or were captured from the plantations had a different set of opportunities shaped by notions of reciprocal privileges and obligations. Again, Sarra’s testimony is enlightening. He recalled that “they give all encouragement for all sorts of negroes to join them and oblige the men to be true to them by an oath which is held very sacred among the negroes, and those who refuse to take the oath, whether they go to them of their own accord or are made prisoners, are instantly put to death.”

As potential warriors these men were crucial to the expansion and protection of the village. Equally important, new arrivals from the plantation often brought ammunition and weapons necessary to fight colonial forces, and could also direct raids back to the plantations from which they recently escaped. It was in the interest of the Maroons to allow men who proved to be loyal and adept to join the community as free men or, at the least, give them opportunities to enhance their material and social status. The men who escaped from Colonel Nedham’s plantation were allowed into the village though not entrusted with authority or knowledge until they proved their loyalty to Maroons. These men later assumed leadership roles among the Windward Maroons. What is more, the Maroons, as Edward Long noted “were endeavoring, by every means in their power, to bring other slaves in different parts of the island to their cause.” Any attempt to hold men as slaves with little chance of earning the right to be free certainly would have hampered efforts to recruit from the plantations. Thus when an enslaved man belonging to Colonel Nedham demanded of the Maroons that they “send home his master’s negros,” they rebuked his command.

The men and women who failed to meet Maroon standards, on the other hand, were either killed or held in perpetual bondage. The framework of reciprocity and opportunities for social mobility did not preclude the violence, dehumanization, and trauma often associated with captivity. An intriguing observation of the Leeward Maroons supports this assertion and describes what bondage may have been like for marginalized men in these villages. The anonymous source noted, “The chief Employment of these Captains was to Exercise their respective men in the Use of the Lance, and small arms…To Conduct the bold and active in Robbing the Planta. Of Slaves, Arms, Ammunition etc. Hunting wild hogs, and to direct the rest with the Women in Planting Provisions- and Managing Domestic affairs.” According to this source, “the rest,” who were presumably men, were required to do women’s work. Besides being emasculated, these men, and likely some women too, suffered from physical abuse and deprivation. The same source reported that Maroons treated some captives with such severity that “some of them afterwards used to Escape from their Tyranny and come to beg the Mercy of their Former Masters.”

Not only did the cultural background of the Maroon slaveholders and their bondmen imply that both parties negotiated bondage through this framework of reciprocity, but the local context did not facilitate the development of a slave society. Unincorporated people, those with “no sense of loyalty forged out of common
experience” certainly represented a threat to Maroon communities. Historian Mavis Campbell uncovered evidence of two women—Venus and Assiba—who exemplify the dangers. The two women purportedly led the militia to the Maroon towns and told them when best to strike. The colonial government compensated these women and others who deserted the Maroons.\(^{35}\) Moreover, incursions by the colonial militia ensured some degree of incorporation for many outsiders regardless of whether they were voluntary bondsmen or captives. For example, both Maroon groups were well-known for their military expertise and the documents point to Cudjoe as an autocratic leader.\(^{36}\) In this context, people in the village had opportunities to prove their worth through battle and possibly attain greater rights and privileges in the process. Finally, Maroons lacked guaranteed access to land and trade markets on the island rendering a slave-produced surplus unnecessary.

There is no evidence that Maroons ascribed to Western notions of autonomy as a definition of “free” in their society. Moreover, individual rights were incredibly difficult to support in Maroon villages constantly under threat of attack. Nevertheless, newcomers most certainly earned the right to be free and to participate fully in the society while those held in bondage did not. Kenneth Bilby, an Anthropologist well-established among the Jamaican Maroons, eloquently noted, “the Maroons’ beginnings are sometimes traced back to the African continent. But for [most], the critical, defining moment in their history occurs when one or more of their captive ancestors decide[d] not to work, vowing to fight instead.”\(^{37}\) Given the methods by which the early Maroons gained their freedom and the difficulties they faced to maintain it, freedom was a privilege, not an obligation.

**Conclusion**

Scholarship on captivity among the Maroons of Jamaica has been slow to forthcoming. First, there is a paucity of information related to the practice of holding people in bondage in these communities during the early colonial period. Neither the Maroons themselves, nor their bondmen, left any written records about captivity in these villages. The oral narratives that may have survived about this topic are largely inaccessible to outsiders, i.e. non-Maroons. Second, scholars are seemingly reluctant to challenge the image of the Maroons as the great black freedom fighters of the colonial world. The Rastafarian movement has certainly perpetuated this image as a challenge to the counter narrative that the Maroons turned their backs on those enslaved on the plantations when they signed the Treaties of 1739.

This paper places captivity among the Maroons within the larger context of bondage in indigenous, kin-based societies. By examining bondage in the Akan-speaking communities of pre-colonial West Africa and in the southern nations of Native Americans, I have argued that captivity among the Maroons existed long before the census takers recorded the first Maroon slave and bondage encompassed a wide range of experiences and included mechanisms for incorporation. All dependents, of which bondmen were a category, had certain rights, privileges, and obligations determined by the nature of their dependency.
In addition to providing a comparative framework for understanding captivity among the Maroons in the early colonial period I have shown that acknowledging the practice of holding people in various states of bondage in Maroon villages need not challenge the notion of Maroons as freedom fighters nor confirm their supposedly traitorous nature. Captivity and unfreedom was widely practiced throughout the colonial world. Africans, Native American, and Europeans all had long histories of holding people in various stages of servitude and bondage. An acceptance that the same was true of the Jamaica Maroons merely confirms their historical location in the early colonial Atlantic world.
Endnotes


2 Robert Charles Dallas, *The history of the maroons, from their origins to their establishment of their chief tribe in Sierra Leone: including an expedition to Cuba, for the purpose of procuring Spanish chasseurs; and the state of the Island of Jamaica for the last ten years: with a succinct history of the island previous to that period.* vol. 1 (London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1805; Reprint, London: Cass Libraries, 1968), 22-26.


8 CSPCS, #486 “Governor Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations.” November 13, 1731; CSPCS, #331 “Governor Trelawny to the Duke of Newcastle,” July 7, 1737. Theft from the plantation is acknowledged in oral narratives of present-day Maroons, see Kenneth M. Bilby, *True-Born Maroons* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), #19, 104.

9 Anon. “History of the Revolted Negroes in Jamaica,” 69; CSPCS, #627i “Address of the Governor and Council of Jamaica to the King Nov. 21, 1730,” December 24, 1730; CSPCS, #486, 1731; CSPCS, #55, 1734; CSPCS, #75i , 1734. In 1730 several women and children were carried off from two settlements in Port Antonio, CSPCS, #111 “Governor Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations,” March 11, 1730 and CSPCS, #519, 1730. Also see, Kopytoff, “The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies.”

10 Bilby, *True-Born Maroons,* 1-54 for a nuanced discussion of the struggles over ownership and control of Maroon culture and heritage.


13 Historian Akosua Perbi identified many of the restrictions placed on enslaved men and women on the Gold Coast, A History of Indigenous Slavery on the Gold Coast, 130-132.


15 Willem Bosman remarked that for people on the Gold Coast, “their Riches consist in the Multitude of Slaves,” A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts (London, 1721), 204.


18 Genovese describes Maroons as “attempting to resurrect an archaic social order often perceived as traditionally African but invariably a distinct Afro-American creation,” Eugene Genovese, From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World (Baton Rouge: Louisiana


22 CSPCS, #50 “Governor Hunter to the Duke of Newcastle” February 11, 1731.

23 Women were well protected in Maroon communities. See CSPCS, #25iii “Extract of Col. Campbell’s letter of the examination of some rebellious negroes lately taken,” January 23, 1731; Bilby, *True-Born Maroon*, 157-159.


27 Ebenezer Lambe, a member of the militia group sent out against the Maroons at Port Antonio in January 1733 noted that “the rebels” fired on and killed both whites and blacks in the party. Perhaps some of the “negroe shott” and baggage men who fled during campaigns against the Maroons did so not to join the rebels rather to escape the retribution they would face if captured by them. CSPCS, 75ii “Journal of proceedings of the Parties commanded by Edward Creswell and Ebenezer Lambe, kept by Ebenezer Lambe Jan. 27, 1733,” March 27, 1733; Campbell, *Maroons of Jamaica*, 67.


29 CSPCS, #486 “Governor Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations,” Nov 13, 1731; CSPCS, #244i “Mr Ashworth to Governor Hunter June 1733,” July 7, 1733; CSPCS, #320 “Governor Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations,” Aug 25, 1733. Those who fled to the Maroons with “such arms as they could get,” may have been particularly welcomed as access to weapons and ammunition was limited,
CSPCS, #19 “Governor Hunter to the Duke of Newcastle,” January 16, 1732. More than 30 bondmen left the estate of John Morant to join the Maroons carrying their field tools, CSPCS, #388 “Governor Hunter to the Council of Trade and Plantations,” September 20, 1732. Maroons used these tools to attack the breastworks, CSPCS, #174 “Council of Trade and Plantations to the Duke of Newcastle,” May 22, 1734. Edward Long similarly suggested that those hoping to be accepted by the Maroons performed deeds “recommending themselves to their new friends” The History of Jamaica, or, General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of that Island: with reflections on its situation, settlements, inhabitants, climate, products, commerce, laws and government, vol. 3 (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 446.


CSPCS, 311ii “Examination of Nicholas Plysham before the Governor and Council of Jamaica, 18th June 1730,” July 4, 1730.

Interestingly, the census records categorize the men using military terms. Men are listed as “able men” or “fit to carry arms” and are grouped separately from the elderly and boys. Also see Campbell, Maroons of Jamaica, 46-50.

[Anon.] to Knight, N.D., Add. MS 12431, 76 also cited in Kopytoff, “The Early Political Development of Jamaican Maroon Societies,” 297.


Campbell, Maroons of Jamaica, 108. CSPCS, #484ii “Information by ‘an Ebo named Cupid’ escaped the rebels,” Feb. 27, 1735.

Knight, “History of Jamaica,” Add. MS 12419, 95-97.

Bilby, True-Born Maroon, 98.
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