



# Maroonage in Haiti: The Haitian Perspective

by

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## DEDICATION

Dear Friends,

Thank you all for the support provided during this research project on the Haitian Maroonage. Particular appreciation is dedicated to the Ex-Minister of Education, Dr. Lucie Carmel Paul-Austin who wrote a fantastic book “*Partir Marron*” on the subject. Her book, in my opinion, makes one of the strongest arguments to date in support of the Haitian school of thoughts on maroonage. Not less consideration is given to Professor, Bayyinah Bello, a world-known scholar, and researcher who has dedicated a lifetime to inform and set the record straight about Haiti’s cultures and history at the [University d’État d’Haïti // State University of Haiti]. Many other friends and family contributed directly and indirectly to this research, and to you all, I dedicate this first phase of my short study: *Maroonage in Haiti: The Haitian Perspective*.

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## Maroonage in Haiti: The Haitian Perspective

Maroonage is a way of life that is as mysterious and misunderstood in today's society as it was in the 1500's. In Ayiti, contrary to popular belief, historical evidence suggest that Maroonage did not initially start with Black Africans, although the enslaved people from Africa ultimately perfected it. Bartolome de Las Casas, a Spanish Priest who saw first-hand and wrote extensively about the indigenous people in the Caribbean, reported that the natives, called the Tainos for some or the Arawaks for others when faced with forced labors, cruel and inhuman treatments from the settlers, would have started timidly the maroonage movement. In the *Short Account of The Destruction of the Indies*, Las Casas wrote:

*"It was upon these gentle lambs, imbued by the Creator with all the qualities we have mentioned, that from the very first day they clapped eyes on them the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold, or like tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days. The pattern established at the outset has remained unchanged to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly..."*

"These simple creatures" he continued, "in whom one can't find neither malice nor deception but love and reverence for the settlers, would run away to hide their pains and sufferings" (Las Casas, 1552).

Runaway was, in fact, the last option for the Tainos. As earlier as 1495, exactly three years after the Colons would have arrived, the Tainos would challenge them to an open battle in La Vega Real, a vast plain area believed to have extended from the Dominican Republic to Ayiti (see map below). This challenge was in direct response to the inhuman exploitation and cruelty decried by Las Casas. There are conflicting accounts as to what

really happened during this battle. No native people, as far as we know, has ever written a record of events from their own perspectives, and as Winston Churchill said it best, "The Tales of any great battle is written from the perspectives of the victors". However, Dominican historians reported, that in the battle of La Vega Real, 200 Spaniards armed with swords, muskets, and cannons, and accompanied by mad dogs killed nearly 100,000 indigenous armed with batons, stones, and arrows. It was an absolute massacre. The Tainos would have learned quickly and in a terrible fashion to never confront head-on an enemy that was proven so powerful and deadly.

It would take until the 1520's, more or less 25 years later, for the Cacique Enriquillo to escape the Spanish's plantations with a small group of followers to the mountains of Baoruco, located in the Southeastern part of Ayiti according to early maps of the region.



Source: AA, P. Vander (1707)

From Baoruco, Enriquillo would wage a 14-year war against the colons, guerilla styles, coming to the cities during the nights to kill and loot; and retracting to the mountains to plan attacks again the next day. As Enriquillo's followers grew from few hundreds to many thousands this rebellion went on continuously for over a decade, spreading fear and desolation into the hearts and minds of the occupiers.

Among Enriquillo's growing number of followers were the enslaved Africans who have been forcibly arriving in Hispaniola as earlier as 1503 to replace the Tainos. Although the Africans were not very familiar with the landscape of Hispaniola, new name given to Ayiti by the settlers, they learned quickly the hide-outs, the conditions of the terrain and the modes of existence of the natives. Many of them, already skill warriors in Africa, would join with the Tainos to form fearless groups which would go on for years to harass the Colons until submission and peace's treaties were signed. These fearless groups were called the Maroons, from Spanish's "Cimarrón" meaning salvages, and the practice identified as the maroonage.

### Run-Away to Fight another Day

Some say the maroonage was more than a run-away strategy or people taking refuge to escape hard labors and exploitations. Others said it was simply that, a group of lazy people running from slavery. Yvan Debbasch, in his Essay on *The Desertion of the Slaves in the Antilles*, tried to trivialize the maroonage as "a simple act of lawlessness, discontented groups of individuals, incapable of any serious form of resistance against slavery" (Debbasch, 1962). The act of maroonage, Debbasch theorized, was a desperate reaction of the slave against beatings and mistreatments, hunger and deprivation, or even against being sold to another plantation where he would be cut-off from family and any coping mechanism. Debbasch's compatriot, Gabriel Debien, in his *Maroonage to the French Antilles in the XVIIIe Century* concurred:

*"The slave maroon was similar to the wild animal; he would usually retire in the wood, living near cliffs and deserted areas. He would get out only at night to cultivate or extract manioc, potatoes, and other fruits or to steal whatever cattle he could. His goal was to escape however far, and live as a primitive and a robber in the forest." (Debien, 1966)*

Debien took the time, however, to differentiate between the "Grand Maroonage and the Petit Maroonage". The former referred to the slaves who departed with no intention in coming back. How could anyone know their intention? The latter reminded of those who left for a short period, during a night for instance, but always came back to the plantations. Both Debien and Debbasch never considered the idea that the maroon would go away to plot, strategize, train and then come back with a vengeance that neither bayonets nor cannonballs could stop.

On August 22nd, 1791 the world would get a first glimpse of what the slaves of Ayiti were planning while in maroonage. Haitian historian Thomas Madious, writing about this event reported,

*"On the exact day, at exactly 10:00 pm, a large blaze erupted as a signal for the insurgency. The slaves, led by Boukman, Jean-François, and Flaville, suddenly emerged from everywhere. Dancing to the rhythm of African music, which caused panic everywhere, they went on to massacre great numbers of White colonialists, those same persons who have been repeatedly beating them and inflicting upon them all sorts of miseries and humiliations...." (Madious, 1847)*

Debbasch and Debien's theories of the maroonage were about to hit a pause. If anything, what happened on August 22nd, 1791, suggested at least some sort of planning, training, leadership, and resolution. The Haitian revolution that started on that date was not a sudden outburst of the Maroons. In fact, throughout the 1500s, 1600s, and 1700s the Maroons were constantly sowing havocs in Ayiti. They went on from small victories to

many crushing defeats, but they were persistent. From Enriquillo (1500s) to Padrejean (1600s) to Macandal and Boukman (1700s) these were leaders of maroons, known for their temerity, and who were caught, killed and their heads exposed in public places. At the end of the 1600s for instance, France had passed laws and regulations, the most famous of them was the **Code Noir of 1685**, which tried to regulate the movement of the slaves and their interactions with each other. The Colons in Ayiti were getting terrified of the growing and better-organized movements of the Maroons, but they never thought the slaves could take it all the way to Independence land. In fact, how could they imagine that a people, whose presumed desires were only to run away to escape slavery and live as primitives in the forest, would come back willingly to fight passionately their oppressors to the detriment of their own lives? The Haitian revolution was about to send a shockwave around the world.

### **The maroonage in the Haitian Context**

From a perceived simple escape's strategy from slavery, the maroonage became a formidable technique of war in the hands of the Haitians who used it with dexterity to defeat France's Napoléon, an enemy that was well equipped and better prepared. Laurent Dubois, in the *Avengers of the New World*, captured the essence of the word nicely when he described the culture of maroonage as a "rich tale of insurrection, heroism, and victory." (Dubois, 2004)



Le Marron Inconnu: Albert Mangones

The event on August 22nd, 1791 caught almost everyone by surprise. The white colonists were prepared to confront and defeat an enemy, the mulattoes, which has been demanding, sometimes violently, for more freedom and equality with their white counterparts, and greater autonomy to manage the affairs of Ayiti. The mulattoes were individuals of colors, born from relationships between Whites and Blacks. Children from these relationships and who were accepted by their white fathers were recognized as legitimate, freed from slavery from birth and were able to get an education in France. Usually, after their education, these children would return to Ayiti to help their fathers manage the affairs of the plantations. This group has been growing disenchanted by the fact that they were kept as a second class citizen in the colonies, unable to pursuit, attain and enjoy certain privileges reserved for their fathers only. Thus, they were demanding more equality and autonomy and were willing to take arms to attain these objectives.

Many found in this growing disenchantment of the mulattoes, the very foundation of the Haitian Revolution, not in the maroonage movement. Coke Thomas, in *A History of the West Indies*, hinted, unable to appeal to the conscious of their fathers in regards to equality and autonomy, the mulattoes tried to push the slaves to a general revolt against the white planters. Their hopes were that the slaves would join their causes in favor of gaining controls of the affairs of the colony. In return, the mulattoes would compensate them with freedom and parcels of land. As long as they don't create any more disturbances, the freed slaves would be left alone to vacate to their own activities, but they would still be French's subjects.

In fact, this idea of fighting against the French but as French's soldiers, not really towards the goal of independence but towards equality and better treatments seems to have been well imbedded in the mind and heart of at least one of Haiti's greatest heroes, Toussaint Louverture. In his second letter to Napoleon Bonaparte, Toussaint wrote,

*"The respect and submission I owe you have always been engraved in my heart. If I sinned in carrying out my obligations, it was not intentional. If the formalities I was supposed to follow weren't, it was inadvertent. If I erred in making a constitution, it was through the great desire to do good; it was having been too zealous, too proud..." (Sept. 16, 1802)*

This letter, as well as other correspondences from Toussaint, seems to confirm the notion that the *General* was looking for better treatment for himself and his family, not necessarily for the end of slavery. But this would be a hasty judgment that would put us in the same line of thinking as the planters of St. Domingue. Tricked by a fake invitation to sign a peace treaty, Toussaint was captured by the French soldiers and put on a boat to France. This is when his final words gave extraordinary meaning to the complexity of the Haitian Maroon: "In overthrowing me, only the trunk of the tree of Negro liberty has been cut down; its branches will shoot up again, for its roots are numerous and deep."

What was Toussaint talking about? What type of Negro liberty was he referring to? How could he be so sure that he was already too late to stop the liberty movement? The answers to all these questions point only to one direction: **in the midst of the chaos and confusion that reigned in St. Domingue, there was an underground and more disciplined culture of resistance, preparation and training only known to the Maroons who were ready to take over at a very precise moment.**

The White colonists were not prepared for the Black slaves to raise up and fight for similar causes as the mulattoes. They were not prepared because, among other things, they were firm believers in the prevailing theories of species at the time, the *polygenism*, which effectively convinced them that Blacks couldn't be inspired by concepts of freedom and justice. As Madious exposed, the planters of St. Domingue believed the Maroons were "lawless creatures and they will get back to business as usual when they were caught and punished". This belief also pushes Debien to "downplay the slave's ability to express a united, thoughtful and sustained opposition to slavery". Even The famous French philosopher Voltaire reinforced this belief when he said, "The Negro race is a species of men different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds."

The slave's ability to induce the masters into believing they were resigning to their lots of misery and humiliations; that no man nor god, and certainly no form of ideology could take them away from the infernal plantations was extraordinary. The Haitian slaves needed this strategy of mass deception for a while. Lucie Carmel Paul-Austin, in her *Partir Maroon*, talked about the "*Roublard*" this strategy of "*roule'm de bò*" "it's me, it's not me" to attain a specific end (Paul-Austin, 2014). The maroon became a strategist who cries like a baby when he has to, runs like a coward when he must, accepts his chains although he could break it, all with the ultimate objective of preparing for the most



successful of all slave's battles for freedom: **The Haitian Revolution**. Paul-Austin (2014) asked eloquently, "Is he maroon after or before he left the plantation?"

On the first day of the revolution, the killings and fire started inside the plantations. Masters were poisoned by their most trusted slaves, while many others were also saved by their servants. The fighters did not come from the outside only, they were also from within. They have been there all along, waiting for the appropriate time to strike. The maroonage was not only a physical removal from pain, would say, Austin, it was also a state of mind. The maroon's spirit was freed way before the physical body followed suit. The whites planters of St. Domingue failed to recognize this at their own expenses.

The Haitian revolution revealed thus the true character of the Haitian Maroon. They were men and women capable of enduring the crudest of atrocities but also capable of fighting like lions. They were ruthless but with a compassionate heart that allows them to save many of their old masters. In the midst of raging battles, French officers requested for a break to express their admiration for their bravery. Time was no longer to run but to stand and fight, and fight the Maroons did. Madious (1847) couldn't find better words,

*"Like angels of death, many Spartacus crisscrossed Haiti taking revenge for their race prosecuted and enslaved for nearly 300 years. In the end, Dessalines, Petion, Clervaux, Capois and Christophe acquired our independence and brought to closure the works initiated by Toussaint Louverture." (Madious, 1847).*

## **The Maroon Legacy**

Nowadays, there is no maroon society in Ayiti. There is no specific place in Haiti where one can go to meet with maroons, strictly defined as a run-away. However, some of the



culture and the spirit of the maroonage still live on. In the sense that Maroonage was also a state of mind, particularly strong in rural areas, the maroon's spirit of survival, the know-how of survival tools and techniques, the stories, the dances and even the herbal medicines used are very much on display.

In Nan Bay, a small community in Tapion, located at 65km south of Port-au-Prince, Haiti I lived for a number of years with a group of people whose modes of existence resembled that of the Maroons. In fact, Tapion, a mountainous and rocky area where highway #2 connects the South with the rest of the country, still carries the stigma associated with a risky and dangerous place to adventure uninvited. Among the stories narrated by the villagers, is the story of Kodjoe, the first slave believed to have taken cover in this area. The elders talked about Kodjoe as a mad man who could never be captured no matter what army was sent. He would stay inside the grottoes with a small band of followers and attack any cargo of merchandises or supplies that ventured by. He was eventually captured and killed, but his sons, and particularly one of them named "DiTreil", continued the tradition until the state moved the highway to a safer location. One can still see the vestiges of the old highway and some of the caverns where Kodjoe and followers lived. This practice of going after cargoes is still a modern-day concern also for the authorities and other peaceful villagers living in Nan Bay.

DiTreil Charles, according to family accounts and official records, was my great grandfather. For Kodjoe, I couldn't find any trace of him on any official record but the narratives of the locals only. I ended up this phase of my research knowing one thing for sure: I now know the reason my mother would call us (my brothers and me) "Pitit Kodjoe" translated "Sons of Kodjoe". When we were of very young ages we used to fight a lot, I mean fight with everyone and anyone who would dare to look at us differently or talking to us in a bad way. I realize now that most people in Nan Bay use this name



Kodjoe also to characterize the fighting mood and spirit of their relatives. I wonder if they know the tales of the real Captain Cudjoe, the maroon who helped to change Jamaica's story forever. I tend to believe that perhaps Haitians and Jamaican are more connected than they can ever imagine. At one point the two people shared the same struggles, the same story, and the same aspirations. Boukman was born in Jamaica, he went on to become one of the fathers of the Haitian revolution, and one of the greatest maroons who ever lived in Haiti.

## Conclusion

The Haitian school of Maroonage is in the midst of a revival and rebranding where the Haitian Maroon is no longer single-handedly defined by those who have scantily studied the phenomenon and whom might have been subjected to inherent biases associated with colors, nationality, social class, political affiliation and even perhaps education level. The Haitian Maroon is now defined from the Maroon perspective, or better say, by those they left behind, those same individuals who still live in the "Lakoue", in the grottos, and whom still share the cultural tendency, the language, the modes of existence and the religious practices of the Maroons. This new approach will help to eliminate some of the stereotypes associated with the Maroon in Ayiti; stereotypes that want people to believe the Maroon is less educated, devoid of modern concepts of societies, and more importantly, he cannot be trusted. These are misconceptions fueled by literature written from a colonial perspective, literature that has also been unfortunately prevalent in Haiti's education system. The Maroons of Haiti stand as tall as any individual or groups from past and modern histories. Their tales must be told from their own perspectives to generations for years to come. Their societies must be allowed to exist and thrive. There is so much we can learn from their ways of life.

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