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Maroon warrior

THE MAROONS

AFRICAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS

IN THE HILLS OF JAMAICA

"Africa now must look upon those in the West as a kind of Maroons. By taking millions out of Africa . . . an area (was created) through which people could surface, and go back in and out of Africa to help liberate Africa. Sound out Abeng sounds for Africa. Sound out freedom sounds for Africa. And that is the role of the Maroon in any slavery system."

—Dr. Robert Hill

by Sister Farika Birhan

I first met the Maroons of Jamaica in their community in 1966, spurred on by the curiosity of a delegation of African sportswriters and intellectuals who were in Jamaica for the Commonwealth Games. As public relations officer for the Games, I had taken the Ghanaian and Nigerian groups under my wing.

One day, while looking at a map of Jamaica I had given him, a Ghanaian sportswriter exclaimed: "Accompong! You have an Accompong in Jamaica! We have Accompong in Ghana. I must go to Accompong . . . take me there." With the assistance of his countrymen, he kept up a steady campaign for me to organize a trip for them to Accompong.

Up until that time, I, like most Jamaicans, had not given serious thought to the Maroons. As a child, I had hints of their existence from adults. They alluded to the Maroons as a strange, fierce people deep in the mountains who kept their own laws and customs separate from those of the rest of Jamaica. Yet I knew that when they chose to come out of their communities and dwell with other Jamaicans, people thought them less strange.

People have often asked me if I have Maroon ancestry. I was told that it was the look I had in my eyes and the way my eyebrows grew, as well as the habit I had of walking stealthily up to people and frightening them when I showed myself. Other clues were that my aim was almost perfect — although a woman — and my "Koromantee foot."

My grandmother often spoke of her Koromantee relatives in the Maroon town of Moore Town. It was she who first revealed that my elder brother and I had inherited the Koromantee foot. According to her, the Koromantee tribes had thin legs which enhanced their ability to walk soundlessly. Since we were often teased about our wiry legs, I did not then thank the Koromantee for their gift though I did come to know that I was related to "the strange people."

As I grew up, I found that people either admired the Maroons for their victories against the British and their refusal to be enslaved, or spoke condescendingly of

them, dwelling on the negative aspects in the treaty they signed with the British. I always noticed a hint of fear, and often a note of envy in their disapproval.

The British terribly distorted and brought disrespect to Maroon history. They have taught African Jamaicans to use the names of the great Maroon leaders such as Quashie, Cuffee and Quako to mean a fool, a country bumpkin and an upstart person who does not know his place. I had often heard these names used in the Jamaican dialect but never realized that they belonged to the heroes of the Maroon struggle.

I turned these things over in my mind that early morning as the taxi blew for me to catch the diesel train and get on with the journey in search of the Maroons, taking along the Ghanaians who had talked me into the trip.

After our group disembarked from the diesel at Maggotty, the nearest stop to Accompong, I began asking the townspeople for directions. Everyone was discouraging. They told me that I should turn back, as it was absolutely unheard of for outsiders to go to Accompong without first making an appointment with the "colonel" to get permission to enter his terrain. I heard tales of how dangerous the Maroons were and withstood questions directed at my boldness in trying to go up to Accompong.

I finally managed to get a car to take us to the nearest point the driver would go to the town. Upon arriving foot-weary into Accompong, I found a European anthropologist living comfortably among the Maroons. It was to be a day of pleasant surprises.

Accompong spread out before me like a great table. It is high in the Cockpit Mountains. I was surprised at its beauty, splendor and grandeur. I was amazed that these "dangerous" people had no crime in their community and had not seen a murder committed on Maroon soil for hundreds of years. I found them strong, healthy people, living long, vigorous lives. Some of them live to be well over a hundred.

We were welcomed very cordially by the head of the town. He recognized immediately that I was bringing a party of Africans

to his community, and all the Accompong people who I met also knew this as soon as we approached the town. I had been having a very difficult time convincing Jamaicans that I was traveling with continental Africans even though they heard the delegation speaking English with Ghanaian accents. I was alerted right away to the difference in vision between the Maroons and other Jamaicans.

Our group was told some of the oral history of the Maroons. The African-Maroons were brought to the island during the 1500s. They were military servants and workers for the Spaniards who first invaded the island. Others were cowboys, roaming the countryside freely, looking after the cattle and horses of the Spaniards. Some Maroons functioned as body servants and as a special defense unit for the island. Very few were field-workers, as the Spaniards did not set up a proper plantations system and used Arawak Indians for field-work. A few Maroons had begun to set up their own villages in the remote hills before the arrival of the British.

When the British invaded the island in 1655, the Maroons fled to the mountains with what was left of the decimated Arawaks. Some of the Maroons helped the Spaniards in their fight against the British, and the British could not conquer the Spaniards while the Maroons assisted them. Consequently, the British offered the Maroons their freedom if they would leave the fight. When the Maroons accepted, the Spaniards were defeated and chased off the island. However, the Spaniards left some of their armaments and munitions with the Maroons.

The British tried to enslave the Maroons after the Spaniards departed, but the Maroons fought valiantly. To the Maroons, the island was their own as it was they who had defended it. They set up communities in each county of the island and controlled the mountain ranges. The strongest community was in the Blue Mountains until the British began importing slaves from Africa, swelling the population of the western Maroon lands.

The Africans arriving on the slave ships

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knew of the Maroons. Many jumped from the ships upon arrival and escaped to Maroon territory. Others fled the plantations during the slave rebellions. After spending a large amount of money trying to conquer the Maroons, the British were forced to admit defeat and eventually signed a peace treaty, leaving the Maroons to enjoy their freedom.

One of the great battles between the Maroons and the British took place at Peace Cave. This was the place where Captain Kojo, the great Maroon leader, signed the treaty with the British in 1739. Peace Cave is on the eastern frontier of the Maroon territory, located on the way from Aberdeen Plantation to the Old Town (Trelawny Town) settlement. The cave appears to be a single rock with its entrance somewhat hidden from view. It has a capacity of about 10 cubic yards and can hold about 12 to 15 men. It was in this cave where Kojo hid his bugler when the British attempted a raid on the Old Town settlement.

After the British discovered the Maroon settlement at Old Town, an early-morning attack was planned to destroy the village. The Aberdeen Plantation was the nearest point from which the British could launch an assault on the village. When the Maroon "myal" dancers revealed to Kojo that an attack would occur the next day, he summoned an urgent meeting of his men. (Myalism is a mysterious phenomena where the individual operates under spiritualistic influence.)

Very early the next morning, Kojo got 300 men and led them to Peace Cave. The warriors hid behind rocks and bushes, waiting for the arrival of the British soldiers. Kojo then positioned the bugler in the cave with the "abeng."

(The abeng is made from the horn of a cow. It comes from the Twi word, "aben," meaning horn. It was used in the war against the British to warn of intruders entering Maroon territories. It can be heard from as far off as 10 miles. Its sound has always been associated with the "trumpet blast of freedom" throughout the Caribbean. The Maroons use the abeng today to warn of danger, at funerals, to call important meetings, to make pronouncements affecting the community's future, and on festive occasions.)

With the bugler in place, Kojo had his men place a "rocking stone" in the trail where the British had to pass. Strict orders were given to the bugler to listen for the clanging stone, as this would indicate that the enemy was passing. When the sound made by the stone stopped, he was to blow the abeng.

It was still early morning when the British struggled along the narrow bushy trail for the surprise attack. Each soldier stepped on the rocking stone due to the narrowness of the path. After the clatter of the stone had ceased, the bugler raised the abeng and gave a loud blast from the shadows of

the cave. Maroon muskets blazed with fury on the startled British redcoats. Yells and groans were heard as far away as Old Town. The ambush succeeded and the British were totally defeated.

One man, however, was spared. Kojo ordered that the survivor should return with the news of the defeat to the British authorities. Traditionally it has been said that one of the soldier's ears was cut off and sent back to Spanish Town. Kojo and his men then buried the dead soldiers near Peace Cave.

After much discussion in the House of Assembly at Spanish Town, the British agreed that a peace treaty be made with the Maroons. Many Maroons doubted the sincerity of the British proposal and withdrew their agreement. At first, Kojo also doubted it but he decided to meet the British representatives at Peace Cave. Some years earlier Kojo had prophesied that the day would come when the British would seek to make peace with his people.



Part of the Maroons' African heritage is their use of the abeng, shown here in use by Ghanaian Ashantis.

It was agreed that the historic signing of the treaty should be done on the ground where the decisive battle took place. On the appointed day, Kojo spread out his warriors around the whole area as a precaution. Masters in the art of guerrilla warfare, the legend says that the Maroon freedom fighters would disguise themselves as trees, seeming not to breathe, and the British would hang their clothes on them.

When the British arrived for the ceremony, brief greetings were exchanged. Kojo said that he was willing to sign the treaty only on the condition that both parties cut their fingers and bleed into the calabash cup with some water. Alcohol was added to the mixture and both parties drank it. Kojo then accepted the seriousness of the British, and he carried out his part of the bargain with great commitment.

Crucial to the Maroon victory over the

British was the heroine, Queen Mother Nanny. Nanny Town was the home and headquarters of Nanny. It was located only six miles from the peak of the Blue Mountains. It was abandoned after a traitorous slave told the British of its location. With this knowledge, the British subsequently attacked the town.

Moore Town is really new Nanny Town. Moore Town is beautiful, with lush vegetation and flowing rivers. Old Nanny Town is where the Maroons claim Nanny's spirit lives today, guarding the old stronghold from intruders with "impure" motives. They also insist that deceivers who come to Nanny Town never return alive.

I was told many folktales about Nanny and the miracles she performed during the war with the British. Her magical "pots" were really basins in the rivers which held "medicines." These concoctions produced fumes that would make people dizzy, causing them to fall into the basins and drown. Legend has it that Nanny would lure the

British soldiers to these magical spots, then disappear laughing while the poor souls drowned.

Another story recounts how Nanny prayed to her god, Asase, for guidance on whether to continue the war or call a ceasefire. Asase told her to continue the struggle and plant pumpkin seeds. The following day the seeds matured into full-grown pumpkins and the people were fed.

Kojo, Nanny and their six brothers were the outstanding leaders in the Maroon fight for freedom, leading the united Maroon army. Together they were almost invincible. The Maroons say none of their leaders experienced slavery, though Nanny was intentionally sent on a slave ship from Africa in order to help her people survive — physically, spiritually and mystically — during the long separation from Zion. She

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The Maroon communities are far off the beaten track, in the mountains of Cornwall, Middlesex and Surrey counties, where they have existed since the 1600s. Until recently, these communities were virtually isolated from outside contact. The unique Maroon history and "Nyankipon" culture has been well preserved, allowing the visitor to take an inspiring journey into the Jamaican past.

"Nyankipon" is the name that the Maroons call themselves in the African language they have carefully passed on to their descendants. Nyankipon means "Almighty God," as well as "Children of the Almighty," and is derived from the Ghanaian Ashanti language. It reveals the Maroon's spiritual concept of themselves as a blessed people of the Creator, the first ancestor. The name Maroon was given to the Nyankipon by the British because the people refused to be enslaved. The word is derived from the Spanish "cimarron," meaning wild or untamed.

The independent state of Accompong is in the heart of the Cockpit Country, rough terrain known as "The Land of Look Behind." Accompong is the site of the treaty-signing in 1739 between the British and the conquering Maroons, ending 83 years of guerrilla resistance. The British conceded the Maroons' right to live unmolested and administer their own affairs.

On a day trip to Accompong, departing from Damali Beach, Ironshore, Montego Bay (\$50 U.S.), a visitor can enjoy a tour of the town, a performance by Nyankipon musicians and dancers (the music directly corresponds to traditional Ashanti drumming and chanting), a lunch of locally produced foods, and visits to a variety of historic spots, such as the Peace Cave, where the treaty was signed; Old Town, home of the elder Maroons; and the graves of Nyankipon heroes Captain Kojo and Queen Nanny. The town's leader, Colonel Harris, will relate the Maroons' history and conduct a tour of the museum.

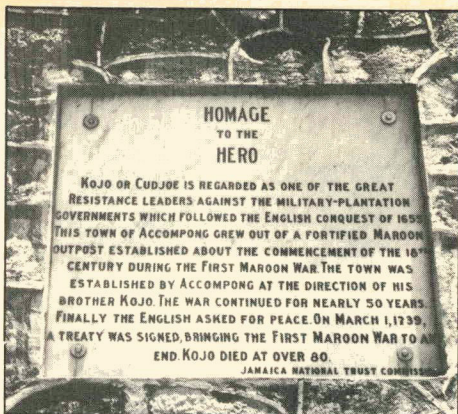
To see Accompong at its festive best, plan your visit for January 6, the celebration of Kojo's birthday and his victory over the British. Nyankipon people from all over the world converge on this day for celebrations beginning early in the morning until late at night.

On a seven-day excursion that includes hiking and camping, a visitor can explore the eastern region of the Cockpit Country that was home to Queen Nanny. Experienced hikers can join General Selwin Mark on a trek to Nanny Town, along paths where entire British regiments disappeared while trying to ferret out the Nyankipon people. Although the town is now abandoned, the Maroons insist that the spirit of Nanny resides there and does not like to be disturbed by visitors with improper motives.

In Moore Town, Colonel Harris will brief visitors on Nanny and her people's history, and guide tours to her monument and to places where she lured British soldiers to their doom.

The picturesque town of Scott's Hall, known to the Nyankipon as Kushu Town, is the secret hiding place of the Nyankipon, where their language and rituals are best preserved. The town's leader, Colonel Prehay, will share a few of the town's secrets if the vibrations are correct. Here the visitor can peek at Nanny's enchanted "pots," river basins where medicines with chloroform-like fumes would make the enemy dizzy, fall in the pot, and drown.

Nyankipon Tours, organized to promote economic and cultural growth in the Maroon communities, may be contacted through Farika Birhan, 1526 Bay Street, Apt. 2, Santa Monica, CA 90405; or Parchi Parchment, Damali Beach Village, Ironshore, P.O. Box 61, Montego Bay, Jamaica. Or, contact the Jamaican Tourist Board. Both one-day trips and seven-day excursions are available, departing from Montego Bay.



MONUMENT TO THE GREAT GENERAL KOJO. The monument is in the town's square. Most important government ceremonies put on by the Kojo Council are held around the monument.



PHOTOS BY GENE WILNER 1985

EX-COL. MORLE WRIGHT, holding a copy of the treaty that was signed in Accompong between the Maroons and British on March 1, 1739, ending 83 years of guerrilla warfare by the Maroons against the British. It was the first time that Britain conceded victory to people living in one of her colonies. It pre-dated the Haitian revolution and the American revolution, and it inspired other freedom fighters.

never signed a treaty with the British, yet obtained a land grant for her people in the Portland area of Jamaica.

Many of the African traditions of Kojo and Nanny live on in today's Maroon culture. Their secrets, obeah, rituals and prayers are expressed in dance, chants and song. For example, the eastern Maroons in Scott's Hall often speak these words:

We know our secret
 We know our language
 We know the secret
 of the Maroons

Another nationalistic song affirms the love of community these people have:

Moore Town is fi mi town
 mi wi mine Moore Town
 mi no lef, Moore Town

I found out after my first visit to Moore Town that it was the spot that had enchanted my mother as a 14-year-old girl when she visited to attend the wedding of one of her relatives. A man became enthralled with her during the wedding festivities. The next day, he rode on horseback to Port Antonio to ask for her hand in marriage from my grandmother. My grandmother was amused and told him that my mother was just a child and much too young. Sadly, the Maroon man departed for the hill country.

I often heard my mother rhapsodize about this incident. She spoke of the town as a land where love overflowed and where everyone was related. I was shocked that she had kept the identity of Moore Town hidden from me all those years.

I have discovered that the Maroons do not call themselves Maroons but rather Nyankipon, the Ashanti word meaning "children of the Almighty" or "the Almighty One." They often translate this as "We are Ashantis, gods of the earth, the best friends anyone can have."

Accompong has become a second home to me. It has changed two leaders, had its roads paved and seen the arrival of electricity. I never tire of visiting this town and walking on its earth, feeling the past echoing through the hills. My ancestral journey continues and will go on until the Maroons are given recognition for their role as freedom fighters. Wherever I go, I tell their freedom stories and sing their songs of victory.

Farika Birhan is a writer, poet, freelance journalist, and Public Relations Officer for the Nyankipon Maroons of Accompong.

POEMS BY IYATA FARIKA BIRHAN

FIREBUN, LET IT BUN DOWN BABYLON

Firebun
 Let it bun dung Babylon
Firebun
 Let it bun out Pope a Rome

Redder red
 Afrika children waan go home
Hotta hot
 Let it bun dung Vatican

Cosmic Fire
 Raging right tru di eart'
Hotta flames
 Let it raze dung Babylon

Redder red
 Let it blaze in Washington
Hotta fire
 Let it bun out Reagan

Hotta hot
 In di blinty of New York, USA
Redder Red
 in Kingston, JA

Fireball
 From I an' I di sun
Hotta Red
 Mek wicked men run

Redder red
 Burning in Namibia, Afrika
Dredda dred
 Azania must be free

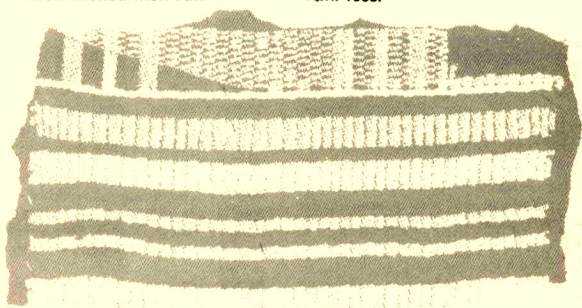
Redda fire
 Wi noh waan no white colony
 In wi lan
 Colonialism flee

Bun dem out
 Let Ithiopia be free
Hotta flames
 Mek it bun dung Buckingham

FIRE
 Let Blackman be free
Fire-red
 Let it bun out misery

FIRE
 Ithiopians INITE
REDDA
 Let us en' all tribal strife.

April 1983.



From *Haile Selassie*, a collection of Theocratic Rastafari poetry.
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