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Maroon Archaeology

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March 2011 Newsletter

Maroon Archaeology

An Interview with Cheryl White

The following article presents an edited version of an interview by Dr. Cheryl White on her work in archaeological investigations of free communities of African descendant peoples that have often been referred to as *Maroon* settlements. The original interview, conducted by editor Anouska Kock, was published on *Abeng Central* via Word Press on March 18, 2011, and is reproduced here with permission. Settlements of Africans and African descendant peoples who defied slavery in the Americas include those referred to as Maroon communities. Dr. White's discussion demonstrates how people of African descent have incorporated Maroon history into a proud sense of heritage. Such incorporation of this terminology in the development of heritage identities represents instances of proud defiance, as the phrase was originally derived from a derogatory Spanish word of "cimarrone," which designated chattel that had run free. Similar communities of resistance were called *palenques* in Cuba and *quilombos* in Brazil.

Q) In academic circles, Maroon archeology is often categorized as a "relatively new field of research." Why is this so?

The archaeology of Maroon ancestral communities is roughly 30 years in the making. It has its roots in historical and plantation archaeology which developed in the late 1960s through 1980s with researchers Charles Fairbanks (1972, 1984), Leland Ferguson (1992) and Theresa Singleton (1980, 1985). There are early accounts of undeveloped investigations (Bonner 1974), but the focus was to simply locate and document sites. It isn't until the 1990s research of scholars such as Kofi Agorsah (1993, 1994, 1995) that Maroon archaeology emerged as a definitive genre of historical archaeology.

I believe the primary reason for the delayed interest was simply due to the challenge of surveying and excavating in dynamic terrains and environments. By definition Maroon ancestral communities are difficult to locate, survey, demarcate and excavate. Wetlands, dense tropical forests and mountainous terrains presented the ideal natural environment for captive laborers to realize their freedom. Regions of the southeastern U.S., Caribbean and Central and South America all bear some version of these obscure and inaccessible environments. But they are extremely difficult places to penetrate and excavate.

In addition, the research of Maroon material culture was in need of a more inclusive theory that is not centered, solely, in themes of rebellion, resistance and retention -- commonly applied to African Diaspora plantation archaeology. Maroons are considered to be a phenomenon of Colonialism, when new ethnic distinctions emerged because of the mixture of African, Amerindian and European cultural mores. Ethnogenesis is the theory applied to this type of cultural transformation and methods such as oral history, ethnoarchaeology and archaeometrics provide important investigative techniques. I expect future research to apply archaeometric methods that include Geographic Information System (GIS) models to aid with site location and radiocarbon dating for organic remains. These methods help develop models based on common landscape variables that transect multiple terrains in different countries.

Q) What is the current status of the Maroon Heritage Research Project (MHRP)?

The MHRP is currently seeking grants to further research in Suriname. In particular, funding that intersects with the management of Maroon cultural heritage.

Q) In what respect has the MHRP been successful?

The MHRP was founded by Dr. Kofi Agorsah, formerly of the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica and currently of the Black Studies Department at Portland State University, U.S. Dr. Agorsah's efforts produced definitive archaeological evidence from Accompong Town and Nanny Town in Jamaica. Both are places of national heritage monitored by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust. Nanny is a national heroine in Jamaica and appears on Jamaica's five hundred dollar bill.

Q) Where did the project not generate the targeted results?

In Suriname, only one of an identified two Maroon settlements has been excavated. There is a 19th century site and ancestral settlement called Tuido. The settlement is attributed to the Matawai Maroons of the Saramaka River valley. To date the site has been identified, partially surveyed, and test excavated. Though few objects have been recovered we are working to compile definitive statements about the physical lifeways of this group of Maroons. I intend to remedy this with future research.

Q) Jamaica and Suriname each hold important archeological sites for Maroon scholars. What are some major differences in the processes and results of research missions conducted in these two countries?

Suriname's Maroon communities are uniquely maintained. The primary reason for this is geography. The Amazon rainforest of South America intensifies the obscurity. Suriname has the largest swath of pristine tropical rainforest in the world. Only 10% of the country's land mass is developed with infrastructure, leaving the remaining 90% as tropical forest dissected by large rivers. Nanny Town and Accompong Town are amidst Jamaica's mountainous interior and currently sections of either site are accessible by some form of pedestrian traffic. I have yet to identify Suriname Maroon ancestral communities with this same degree of accessibility. However, there are similar attributes to both Jamaica and Suriname's Maroon sites: they each present multiple streams of occupation by Indigenous Indians, Europeans and escaped slaves; the occupation periods are similar (mid 1600s to late 1700s); they were settled communities consisting of several hamlets where inhabitants engaged in subsistence farming; and they bear similar types of material culture.

Excavations at Nanny Town present three distinct phases of occupation. The first phase is distinguished by coarse Amerindian earthenware that dates back several hundred years prior to colonialism. The second phase, or Maroon phase, indicates a strong Maroon material identity with a preponderance of artifacts of grinding stones, flint and musket balls. The third phase of occupation displays large stone fortifications indicative of the British military takeover in the 1730s.

Kumako, the defining 18th century settlement in Suriname, has revealed that Maroons appropriated Indigenous Indian ceramic vessels and strategically placed them in areas of ritual practice. These vessels were used solely for ritualistic purposes of spiritual cleansing and protection -- a cultural practice still visible in contemporary Maroon villages. The archaeological evidence to date does not suggest multiple phases of occupations.

Moreover, after approximately 100 years of guerilla warfare between Maroons and Dutch colonialists, peace treaties were signed in the early 1760s. The agreement meant that Maroons would continue to exist in agreed upon isolation.

This arrangement allowed Maroons to nurture and maintain cultural practices with little influence from the coastal cultures. Instead, Suriname Maroons have similar cultural patterns and reside in close proximity to the Amazon's Amerindian tribal groups living in the rainforest interior (see article "Kumako: A Place of Convergence for Maroons and Amerindians of Suriname, S.A").

Because of this, Suriname Maroons are considered tribal peoples according to United Nation convention

169,¹ and as such are invested with all the benefits thereof -- even though they are not indigenous to the Americas. This privilege is not afforded to Jamaica's Maroons or other historically recognized Maroon communities in the Caribbean or in Central and South America.

These distinctions allow research missions to cover a broad scope of research themes that range from cultural transformation to governmental violations of international rights.

Q) What sort of objects have archeologists been able to retrieve at excavation sites? How do these objects help to shape an image of history?

Archaeological evidence from Maroon sites includes earthworks, organic remains, ceramic pottery and historical European objects.



Assorted ceramics recovered in investigations at Maroon community archaeology sites

1. <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C169>.

Earthworks range from: mountain side terraces for mass farming found at Maroon sites in Cuba; wetland swamps and tropical forest mounds encircled by outward jutting stakes for strategic protection as is the case in the southeastern U.S. and Suriname, respectively; to rock shelters of coves, caves and overhangs found at 18th and 19th century sites in St. Croix.

Ceramic objects consist of Maroon made pots used for utilitarian purposes, to Amerindian constructed, but Maroon appropriated vessels used for ritual practice. Historical European objects include sherds of artisan Dutch delftware plates, Spanish coins to olive jars for liquid storage and medicine bottles.

The function and value of found objects is better understood when discovered in the context of formed earthworks.

Q) During field expeditions, what responses do archeologists usually get from local Maroon communities?

Maroon villagers are supportive and have learned to accommodate and tolerate the presence of social science researchers. Maroons are more familiar to the lone socio-cultural anthropologist asking questions about their lifeways. They have grown accustomed to questions about their social organization, subsistence practices, food procurement and socially binding activities. The idea of a small group of people trekking into the bush to “*sukou orou sani ah dutty*” (look for old things in the dirt) sometimes leaves people with an inquisitive stare. This is because the dynamics are different from traditional socio-cultural anthropology where your subject matter often passively tolerates your presence and intruding questions.

Archaeological research rests on the communal approval of villagers. Prior to field work, in a formal gathering, village elders will quiz us about Saramaka history and take several days to deliberate on whether or not the responses were satisfactory enough for them to grant permission to work in the forest. To conduct archaeological research in Maroon territory requires direct guidance from local Maroons in order to locate ancestral communities deep in the forest, excavate sites and interpret artifacts. Also at the end of a field season information is disseminated via a story board of research intent and a display of found artifacts.

There is a reciprocal relationship, and Maroons are engaged in the exposure and interpretation of their culture.

Q) As a western scholar, how did your interest in Maroon history develop?

Though I am based in the U.S., my awareness and interest in Maroon culture stems from my Jamaican upbringing. My grandfather would tell stories about the Maroons of Nanny Town and Accompong Town, Jamaica. After several years working as an archaeologist in the Great Basin region of the western U.S. and the American southeast, my desire to work in a region that spoke to my heritage and roots grew stronger. In 2000 the opportunity to work with Dr. Kofi Agorsah presented itself and I've remained with the program ever since.

Q) For your PhD, you studied the origins of the Saramaka tribe of Suriname. Why Suriname, and why the Saramaka?

Out of all the Maroon communities throughout the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean, Suriname's Maroon communities are the most uniquely maintained. There is extensive ethnographic research about Saramaka Maroons from which to draw. Ethnographic narratives provide a node from which to cross reference historical documents and material evidence found in the archaeological record. In addition, as the most politically organized group, the Saramaka are able to use archaeological evidence to aid in governmental petitions for ownership of culturally relevant forest land.

Q) As part of this study, you conducted field work in Kumako. Where in Suriname is this place located and how accessible is it? How did you get there?

Kumako is one of the first Saramaka settlements and dates back to the late 1600s. It is located at the foothills of Ebbatop Ridge between the Suriname and Saramaka Rivers amidst an intricate circuit of creeks and rainforest brush, beneath the thick forest canopy of the Amazon. Accessibility is a challenge, to say the least. Archaeological excavation takes place at the beginning of Suriname's dry season. At this time snakes are less active and the creeks have enough water to keep living conditions at the bush camp healthy.

The 12 hour plus journey to Maroon territory begins with a car ride from the capital city Paramaribo, to the bank of the Suriname River and continues with an outboard motor boat to one of the larger river side villages (a single engine aircraft cuts this time in half, but unfortunately I am too faint of heart to share a seat with the pilot as s/he flies the plane, so I opt for the road and

river). From the village the crew hikes into the tropical rainforest (remember, Maroons were on the run from colonialists and were able to create enduring communities because of their obscure locations).

I rely heavily on my Maroon guides to locate and maintain a “dummy path” (broken branches or slight cuts on trees to mark direction) from the river side village to the excavation site and our adjoining bush camp. It is several kilometers hike from one of the larger Saramaka villages along the Suriname River. It takes a large crew of roughly 12 (Maroon guides, students and volunteers), two days to hike to the bush camp. Each person carries at least 40 pounds



Cheryl White at a Maroon community archaeology site.

of personal gear, field equipment and food

provisions. A compact crew of 6 seasoned hikers needs only a day. A typical rotation at the bush camp will run 7-10 days. This is long enough to meet realistic work goals and maintain group hygiene in a very unhygienic situation. A 5 day respite back at the river side village allows me time to reevaluate field methods and research goals and it also allows the crews at the bush camp time to replenish.



Preparing food at bush camp.

Privacy and personal space do not exist when doing archaeological fieldwork. At the bush camp we sleep in hammocks tied to agreeable tree limbs (un-agreeable tree limbs make for comic relief in the wee hours of the morning as someone rockets to the ground). Food preparation and personal washing takes place in the nearby creeks. Meat is preserved with salt or smoked over a low burning fire for the duration of a rotation -- this serves the dual purpose of keeping away curious critters. A typical workday is from 8am to 3pm, even though we wake at 4am with the calls of nearby Howler monkeys. The forest canopy severely limits light penetrating to the ground and all food preparation and washing must be done with the little

daylight available. For safety reasons crew members move in pairs between the excavation site and adjoining bush camp.

Evenings are a lesson in *making peace with boredom*. At livelier times we tidy camp, groom ourselves of intrusive biting insects, take stock of the day's artifacts, sit and listen as the Maroon crew members make drum music or tell stories, or we simply pretend that our clothes are clean and dry enough to sleep comfortably in -- the moist nature of the rainforest, coupled with the lack of sunlight, means that once an article of clothing gets wet it stays wet.

Archaeology, especially in the Amazon, is physically taxing work, but there is no greater satisfaction than when you uncover a piece of history and have the privilege to interpret it for others to appreciate.

Q) What did you enjoy most in your research? What was greatest challenge?

The greatest challenge is determining exactly what the settlement pattern and landscape was like. This challenge never goes away. The dense forest brush and the undulating ridges limit visibility to just a few meters and require creative methods in setting up excavation grids and maintaining accurate below surface provenience. Once an artifact, in the form of earthworks or a ceramic object, is found we can begin the process of understanding what Maroon lifeways were like in the early 1700s -- when Kumako was a thriving community for escaped slaves.

For any archaeologist there is great pleasure when something finally clicks; when the landscape reveals itself to you and you can envision what daily life may have been like. Revelations such as these come when an artifact is situated amidst context clues and you can discern its function and value. And as luck goes for many seasoned archaeologists this typically happens at the end of an excavation season. For my dissertation research in Suriname the "big find" happened in the last rotation of a 6 month field season.

Q) You have worked among Maroons for over a decade. You even speak two Suriname Maroon languages (Ndyuka and Saramaka). How has your time among the Maroons impacted your sense of self and outlook on life?

I think the most important lesson I have learned is that when things don't go the way you planned people are there to help make something happen. Here is an illustration. After a 15 hour journey that began in the capital city Paramaribo with an arduous drive along the bumpy red dirt of a bauxite corridor, to the bank of the Suriname River and continuing with a ride in an outboard motor boat, a month's worth of food and field supplies submerged underwater as our boat slowly sank just meters from our destination shore line. Because of time, travel and budget constraints a trip back to the city to restock was not likely. In order to make the next field rotation happen, several villagers provided some basic food items like fruits, sugar, salt and freshly baked bread and the Maroon guides in the crew hunted wild pigs, monkeys, fowls, etc., during the trek to our bush camp -- all enough to keep us fed for several days in the forest. There was another instance when our outboard motor boat ran out of fuel and we rowed (unsuccessfully I might add) and slowly drifted down river for 6 hours until a passing boat aided us. These types of situations would become common while working in Amazonia, but the work always got done and with a cheerful spirit. Maroons are practical, generous and understanding people -- attributes I strive to offer others.

Q) How has your archeological research into the Saramaka contributed to older reports by other scholars in related disciplines, such as history and anthropology?

The archaeology of Maroons is a shift from the subject of slavery and the life of European colonial planters, two common themes in U.S. and Caribbean historical archaeology. Archaeological evidence better illustrates oral testimonies collected via socio-cultural ethnographic studies and first hand accounts found in primary archival sources. The study of Suriname Maroon culture began in the early 20th century with anthropological research conducted by pioneer Melville Herskovits (1936) and the foundational 1960s research of Richard Price (1975, 1983), an astute researcher and the leading expert in Saramaka culture.

My research into Saramaka material culture builds upon these scholars. In addition it challenges and extends what we know about Maroon life ways during their formative period in the hinterlands of Suriname. Furthermore, archaeological research and its methods for dating objects -- unlike archival documents and ethnographic accounts -- provides irrefutable material evidence that can situate a culture in a specific time and place.

Q) How would you describe the public value of Maroon archeology projects?

The archaeology of Maroons provides knowledge about a little known part of African Diaspora history. I think an awareness of Maroon culture, then and now, is a source of pride. And also offers Africans throughout the diaspora a historical reference point and common identity (see article “Maroon Archaeology *Is* Public Archaeology”).

Q) What are you working on now?

At the moment I am authoring a book about Maroon archaeology -- a revision of my PhD dissertation -- to include examples from other researchers of Maroon material culture. Additionally, I have recently published several journal articles² about Maroon material culture and the archaeology of Kumako (an 18th century ancestral Maroon settlement). I recently contributed three chapters on the archaeology of Maroons throughout the Caribbean and South America for a forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Caribbean Archaeology*, edited by Basil Reid and Grant Gilmore for the University Press of Florida (which is currently under review). The contributions provide a comprehensive overview of the theories, methods, location and material evidence associated with Maroon archaeological settlements (in addition to prehistoric archaeological sites in the Guiana Shield of northeastern South America).

I also lecture internationally on historical archaeology of the African Diaspora. In April 2011, I will present a paper titled *Material Markers from Maroon Ancestral Settlements in Suriname, South America* at the 9th symposium of the Archaeological Society of Jamaica, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

I will discuss how archaeological evidence can provide Maroons with the tools to articulate how they negotiated material culture with their European and Indigenous counterparts

2. Maroon Archaeology *Is* Public Archaeology. *Archaeologies, Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 6(3): 485-501 (2010); Kumako: A Place of Convergence for Maroons and Amerindians of Suriname, S.A., *Antiquity Journal* 84(324): 467-479 (2010); Saramaka Maroon Community Environmental Heritage, *Practicing Anthropology* 31(3): 45-49 (2009); Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities, *Caribbean Quarterly* 55(1): 65-88 (2009); Material Beginnings of Saramaka Maroons: An Archaeological Investigation. Ph.D. dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Florida (2007) (Cheryl Ngwenyama); Survey of Social Variables Affecting the Consumption of Mercury-Contaminated Fish among Matawai Bush Negroes of Central Suriname, S.A. Technical Report on file at WWF-Guiana, Suriname, S.A. (2005).

during their formative period in the tropical forest. In order to aid in this process a typology was created to identify and classify each artifact recovered from the 18th century Saramaka Maroon site, Kumako, and the 19th century Matawai Maroon site, Tuido. The three questions guiding the typology creation are: a) How and why did Maroons use objects, self-produced or acquired, in their setting? b) How did Maroons imprint their identity onto the object? c) Are these objects comparable to those recovered from Maroon sites in other circum-Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica, Brazil and Cuba? To answer these three questions, I examine vessel technology, form, and type of decorations on the vessels to deduce the possible cultural use and significance. In addition, the typology creates a language for future discussion of Maroon material culture, and it allows for comparative studies of sites across time scales with other Maroon groups.

In the near future I would like to develop an archaeological institute in Suriname. Unlike its political cousin, the National Anthropological Archaeological Memory Management of the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname is in need of a professional heritage management oversight committee that will incorporate Maroon material culture into legal parlance, particularly for the demarcation of ancestral settlements in accordance with government development ventures. An archaeological institute will act as a clearing house for best practices.

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