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From the Black African Holocaust (Maafa) to the United Nations: Routes, Roots, and Fruits: Maroon Women's Journey to the 18th United Nations, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) April 22- 25th 2019

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Abstract

On April 22-25th, 2019 Maroon Women Chambers of Cooperation representatives from three respective nation-states namely, Suriname, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago attended the 18th Session of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The theme for the forum was “Traditional Knowledge: Generational Transmission and Protection.” This essay explores the goals of that journey, its connection to other Maroon efforts to build Maroon unity in the Western Hemisphere and to establish ourselves as a Peoples, Indigenous and Tribal in the U.N. nomenclature to harness our international human rights.

Keywords: Maroons, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, United Nation, Indigenous, Indigenous Peoples, African diaspora, Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, Marronage, Sovereignty, Self-Determination, Maroon Women Chamber of Cooperation

Introduction

On April 22-25th, 2019 Maroon Women Chambers of Cooperation representatives from three respective nation-states namely, Suriname, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago attended the 18th Session of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The theme for the forum was “Traditional Knowledge: Generational Transmission and Protection.”

The Maroon Women Chambers of Cooperation (MWCoc) was founded on the 14th January 2014 in Suriname by Her Excellency Honorable Fidelia Graand-Galon (then Ambassador of Suriname to Trinidad & Tobago) and a member of the Okanis/Ndjuka Tribe and Gaamaa Gloria “MaMa G” Simms, Paramount Queen of Maroons in Jamaica. The objectives of the MWCoc are to recognize the pressing needs to connect and unite Maroons of the Western Hemisphere, being knowledgeable of the overwhelming freedom and achievement of Maroons in the fight against the reprehensible Trans-Atlantic slave trade, known, since 1988 as the Maafa, “a Kiswahili term for disaster, calamity or terrible occurrence” to describe the history of atrocities inflicted on African peoples and an invitation to people of African descent “to honor our ancestors who have suffered through the middle passage AND the lives that continue to be compromised due to racism and oppression” (www.maafasfbayarea.com). The primary aim of the MWCoc is to connect Maroons of the Western Hemisphere, to help overcome the horrors of enslavement and its long-term consequences, to network with other African retentions groups who consider themselves as non-Maroons in rebuilding sustainable development.

The MWCoc deems it to be absolutely necessary to share our Maroon peoples’ history beginning with our roots as Indigenous nations and peoples of Africa, and in so doing to establish our violable sovereignty and right to self-determination and freedom ensuring that generations here and those to come will live the lives our foreparents fought and died to secure for us.

The ultimate reason for attending the UNPFII, was to seek redress at the international level, by establishing ourselves through the U.N. as Indigenous Africans in the Western Hemisphere. The MWCoc recognizes that Maroon peoples have only recently begun to assert their human rights at the domestic level and have not sought redress from the international level. There have been important steps in this process. As summarized by Andy Reid, the International Human Rights lawyer who attended the 18th Session of the UNPFII with us:

In 2007, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights rendered its ground-breaking decision, *Saramaka People v. Suriname*, finding upon examination that the Saramaka people, a Maroon community in Suriname, were by reason of a distinct social, cultural, and economic character a “tribal peoples” possessed of a juridically recognized personality and of a collective human right to the communal title, use and enjoyment, and protection of their traditionally owned territory, lands, and natural resources. On the distinct history and cultural and spiritual character of Maroon communities, the Court cited to an earlier decision from 2005, *Moiwana Community v. Suriname*, regarding the recognition of the cultural and spiritual rights of N'djuka Maroons in response to a massacre of the village of Moiwana. Both decisions cited to the spiritual relationship and the ancestral ties of the Maroon peoples to the lands they occupied. Some Maroon peoples, including the N'djuka, had even entered into treaties with colonial European powers securing their territories and autonomy (Reid, 2020, unpublished paper *Maroons at the U.N.: Securing Indigenous Peoples Rights*)

Securing our rights to ancestral lands and resources, treaty rights, rights to cultural integrity and rights to participate in decisions affecting Maroon affairs are our central goals. Therefore, as representative of the collectives, nationally and in the Diaspora, our objectives as attendants were to define who we are as Maroons; to seek support to establish procedures in international and domestic law that will recognize Maroon territories, providing for the demarcation of our communal lands; and to claim our rights as a sovereign peoples and nations who have survived marronage and who now live by the principles of marronage, but most of all we seek retention and enforcement of our sovereign power and authority. This is the fundamental foundation of our survival and evolution, which is the way forward for any thriving nation.

The Cultivation of the Culture of Maroonage

In the 15th century when Portuguese started exploring the coast of West Africa, this dramatically transformed African societies, bringing about a negative impact on Africa and Africans that have lasted until today, leading to long-term impoverishment. This involved transportation by slave traders of African peoples, into enslavement. Portugal and Great Britain transported the most; they were the most successful slave trading countries. They targeted areas in Africa such as Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mali, West Central Africa, Angola, Congo, Nigeria and Ghana.

Who are the Maroons?

The word “Maroon” comes from the Spanish word “cimarrones” which means “mountaineers”. It is a name popularly used to refer to descendants of Africans in the Americas and the Caribbean who fled plantation life during the Transatlantic Slave Trade period, to remote, inaccessible mountainous, rivers and swamps to form free independent close-knit communities that practice small-scale farming, hunting and fishing. They were known to return to plantations to free family members and friends. The word “Maroon” can also be used to refer to someone stranded in an isolated place; the word can be either a “noun” or “verb” depending on how it is used. Today, we Maroons are growing into a Nation of united peoples, because of their common

situations. There are Maroon settlements in America and in almost every Caribbean island, wherever there was slavery.

Maroon celebrations, festivals, and other traditional economic activities are an *integral* part of our cultures and any interferences with those activities can/is detrimental to our cultural integrity and survival. Therefore, the land, resource base and the surrounding environment must be protected if subsistence activities are to be safeguarded. In order for the Maroons to enjoy our particular culture, consideration should be placed on the fact that the culture has numerous forms of manifestation. This includes particular lifeways associated with our relationships with other people, with nature, with our spirituality, bearing in mind the relationship that Indigenous people such as Maroons have with the land or environment.

Maroons in International and Domestic Law

Under international law Maroons can be described as “minorities,” “tribal” or “Indigenous” peoples. In terms of our collective rights the labels “tribal” and “Indigenous” are most relevant, and can vary across Maroon groups, depending on the degree of tribal social and political structures that exist within our communities. We are currently engaged in a groundbreaking effort to define ourselves as Indigenous peoples in international human rights law. As our international human rights lawyer, Andy Reid has stated regarding the Suriname Maroons, in an argument that we are extending to the Maroons of the Western Hemisphere:

“The source of the “distinct” social, cultural, and economic character of Maroon peoples recognized in the Saramaka and Moiwana decisions are their roots in the indigenous nations and peoples of Africa. The Maroon peoples of the Americas have retained and evolved their African indigeneity into the “tribal peoples” they are today. They are indigenous survivors of the African Diaspora. Indigenous peoples share a common history of a distinct peoples subjected to imperial victimization and, under international law, self-define. Many share histories with the Maroons not only of distinct cultures but also of enslavement and diaspora from their original homelands. Embracing their indigeneity, Maroon communities of the Western Hemisphere have advanced a platform for Maroon unity to harness United Nations human rights instruments as a Peoples for the full realization of their human rights. This would expand the definition of “Indigenous peoples” to include diaspora communities that have preserved their specific African indigeneity or have grown into unique “tribal” communities through an indigenous “ethnogenesis” of a mixed African indigeneity (Reid, 2020, unpublished paper *Maroons at the U.N.: Securing Indigenous Peoples Rights*)

We seek to enjoy the rights of an Indigenous people under international human rights law, including our rights to enjoy our own culture, to profess and practice our own religion and to use our own languages and rights to engage in economic and social activities to ensure our survival as a peoples.

Present Day Situation of Maroons: Ancestral Lands and Resources

We seek protection through a number of international human rights instruments, which have established, especially under the [Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), that Indigenous peoples have been historically discriminated against and disadvantaged as peoples. Therefore, special measures, protections and affirmative actions are required if we are to enjoy equal protection of the law and full enjoyment of our human rights.

These special measures include: Protection for Indigenous languages, cultures, economics, ecosystems, and natural resource bases, religious practices, ancestral and communal lands, and the establishment of an institutional order that facilitates Indigenous participation in self-governance through our freely chosen representatives. The basis for asserting and protecting our Maroon rights are firmly entrenched in international human rights law. But much work is required to ensure that states implement and respect those rights at the domestic level. While Columbia, Ecuador, and Brazil have made significant progress on paper, Suriname, French Guiana and Jamaica, as well as other countries still have much work to do. Columbia, Ecuador, and Brazil demonstrate that legal guarantees are not enough to ensure cultural integrity and survival. Guarantees must be backed up with effective and proactive enforcement measures. In this respect it is crucially important that Maroons themselves assert and defend our rights and interests.

Environmental Justice and Maroons

Environmental Justice refers to fair and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development implementation and enforcement of environmental laws regulations and policies. It includes equitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits, fair and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making, and recognition of community ways of life, local knowledge, and cultural differences, the capability of communities and individuals to flourish in society.

Like any other Indigenous peoples, Maroons are frequently the victims of environmental injustice. Women tend to be even more affected than men, since rural women typically interact more closely with their environments at home in areas such as food production, processing and childcare in relation to their subsistence needs and overall well-being. In urban areas too, women are on the front lines of battling environmental racism from toxic waste and other forms of pollution. They are the main leaders in environmental justice activist movements globally, and this is also true for Indigenous women.

Recently we have seen much activity here in Jamaica about mining in the Cockpit Country. This is an area situated in three parishes, namely Trelawny, St. James and St. Elizabeth. The land is marked by steep-sided hollows as much as (390 ft.) deep, which are separated by conical hills and ridge. Maroons who had escaped from plantations used the difficult territory for its natural defenses; it easily became their refuge, and today this terrain is sacred to Maroons. It is also threatened by mining interests.

Cockpit Country: A Rallying Point for Indigenous Protection



Map of Jamaica, highlighting Cockpit Country www.cockpitcountry.com; photo source: Z-News

In the late 18th century the Cockpit Country was a place of refuge for Jamaican Maroons fleeing enslavement on the plantations. During this period, they waged the First Maroon War. In this region there are two Maroon villages namely “Kojo’s Town” (named so by the Maroons) or “Trelawney Town” (named after Governor Trelawney) and Accompong Town. Together they formed the “Leeward Maroons.” Kojo’s Town was located in the mountains, in the southern extremities of St. James parish, close to the border of Westmoreland, St. Elizabeth and Trelawny parishes. Accompong is situated just to the south of Kojo’s Town on the border between Westmoreland and St. Elizabeth.

Cockpit Country is Jamaica largest remaining contiguous rainforest, the last remaining wilderness. Home to over 1500 endemic species of plants and animals, that are found nowhere else in Jamaica. Many of these species have not been analyzed scientifically; consequently, the potential values of their active ingredients towards the treatment of various ailments is currently unknown. Indeed, for centuries Maroons populations in the community of Accompong and Maroon Town used these herbs for natural remedies. This lush area provides 40% of Jamaica’s groundwater and is the watershed that serves Western Jamaica, through the Great River, Black River, Martha Brae River, Roaring River and Ys River. There are waterfalls, caves, lush landscape and the cultural traditions of over 73,000 residents in 66 Buffer zone communities in and around this area.

For these reasons, Maroons have been advocating for the protection of the Cockpit Country area, as the Special Mining Lease area 173 is too close to the designated protected area. Considering how critical and important this area is for the sustenance of Cockpit Country and Jamaican Maroon culture, we know that this entire area should not be mined. Bearing in mind all of this knowledge about Maroon peoples, are goals and this particularly urgent need to protect Cockpit Country, after various meetings amongst ourselves, we decided that this Global Gathering of Indigenous peoples annually at the United Nations would be a very important gathering to attend in this era of threats, increased by global climate crisis. It is a way forward, as we prepare to exhaust all meaningful measures needed in order to move on maintaining the peace treaties that were signed by our foreparents, to help secure a better understanding especially with the present day government within our territories.

United Nation Headquarters: Maroons in Attendance at the Seat of International Justice

The U.N. is situated in the Turtle Bay neighborhood of Manhattan on 18 acres overlooking the East River, on the borders of First Avenue on the west, East 42nd Street to the south, East 48th

Street, on the north, and the East River to the east. Central in the International Territory of New York City, is the official headquarters of United Nations.

Bringing to life the commitment of the United Nations, to maintained international peace and security, develop friendly relationship among nations, promote social progress, better understanding and human rights, is the security check point that every person entering the premises has to experience. after going through this, you now are allowed to enter the corridors leading into the building. In the corridors there are a number of significant historical monuments. Largest of them is a marble-designed monument, a very outstanding appealing and attractive sight that draws attention from people of all nations and cultures, school children and educators, and almost all who enter the United Nations grounds. Interestingly the name of this monument is “Ark of Return”

The Act of Acknowledgement and reconciliation: “Ark of Return”

The Ark of Return is a permanent memorial monument to honor the victims of slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In December 2007, the United Nations General Assembly designated the 25th March as the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade and welcomed the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the African Union's (AU) proposal to erect a Permanent Memorial at the United Nations to greet its staff and visitors.

This memorial acknowledges one of the most horrific tragedies of modern history and serves as a reminder of the legacy of slavery and the Transatlantic slave trade—the Maafa—a tragedy going back to a period of roughly 400 years, from the 15th--19th centuries. When more than 12.8 million African men, women, and children were captured and sold into slavery, they were brought onto slave ships under extremely harsh conditions, first to the Caribbean and then to the colonies in North, South and Central America. Many died during their transportation across the Atlantic Ocean from the conditions and from jumping ship to avoid a horror unknown.

Designed by Rodney Leon an American architect of Haitian descent The Permanent Memorial titled: Ark of Returned was unveiled the 25th March 2015. It stands as a constant reminder of the courage of African abolitionists and the unsung heroes who helped end the oppression of slavery. It will continue also to promotes greater recognition of the contributions that acknowledgement of the millions of African people who were transported on slave ships to different parts of the world. The white color recalls African spirituality, in time of death, sorrow and reflection, white attire considered to be an appropriate symbol of mourning. The title “Ark of Return” is a deliberate contrast to the “Door of no Return,” through which the enslaved Africans were transported to the Americas and the Caribbean. The Door of Return is located in the House of Slaves, a museum and memorial on Goree Island, Senegal. It is believed to have been the location of the largest slave trading post on the African coast. In 1978 this island was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List and serves as a reminder of human exploitation and a sanctuary for reconciliation. The Ark of Return invites people to contemplate the legacy and consequences of the Maafa and to fight against racism and prejudices today towards Africans and their descendants, as well as the contributions they have made to the world at large. The triangle patterns on the monument are reminiscent of the triangular route of the slave trade that existed between the continents. The exterior forms reflect the image of a vessel or ship.

Mission Statement of the Ark of Return

It cannot be stated too often: Over four centuries more than 12.8 million people were forcefully removed from Africa to the Americas, Europe and the Caribbean. For those who

survived the horrific middle passage, thousands of them would later perish as a result of the inhumane treatment meted out to them and from the appalling conditions in which they had to exist on the plantations.

The Permanent Memorial will serve as a reminder of the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the Maafa.

A Significant symbolic meaning of the “Ark of Return” to the “Door of Return” in the “Year of Return “in the “International Decade of African Descent”, Diaspora Maroons participating in a Global Gathering of Indigenous People at United Nations Headquarters in New York U.S.A

In the year 2019, it was significantly important for us attend the 18th sessions global gathering of Indigenous Peoples and make this symbolically historical journey that sent chills to our bodies, when we summarize the patterns of landmark events that are coming together.

First of symbolic significance was the fact that although the monument was always bustling with people of all nations, especially children, our small group of African Descent was the only group that this significant monument represented, who are children of these Africans who suffered the consequences.

We listened to the trained tour guide, telling our stories, uninterrupted.

When he was finished, we introduced our group, and told him the other side of our story, of the African trans-journey returning out of the Transatlantic Trading, 1796-1800s into Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada and then on to Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa, where we become part of their village and the first expressive culture returning to Africa.

The tour guide was astonished and thankful.

Secondly the Door of No Return was the final door from which captured Africans emerged from their holding areas in the dungeons of the coastal castles to be loaded onto ships that transported slaves out of Africa. In 1997-8 three women in Jamaica were led on a spiritually journey throughout Jamaica. This mission started after Minnion Phillips “Sista Minnie” stumbled upon a strange container sitting on the veranda of the Seville Great House plantation in St. Ann’s, Jamaica. On discovering that the container contains the remains of a slave ancestor, a young African woman, Sista Minnie was very surprised to know that and decided that dignity should be restored, so she set out to do so. Myself, Gaamaa Gloria “MaMa G” Simms and Sista Blossom “YaaYaa Mama” also got involved: As a traditional Priestess my duties were to convey inspirational messages from the ancestors, messages of ancestral memories, to bring them back from their former after-lives. I was very profound being a medium for ancestors.

This journey eventually manifested itself in Ghana on Sunday, August 2, 1998 in a ceremony themed: “Emancipation: Our Heritage, Our Strength” led by Sister Minnion Phillips and Sonny Carson of the United States of America. The remains of Samuel Carson and Crystal were symbolically passed through an opening within the Cape Coast Castle named, “The Door of No Return.”

The symbolic passing of these two remains through the “Door of No Return” thereby sought to reverse the essence of the “Door of No Return” to the “Door of Return” signaling to people of African Descent in the diaspora that the time is ripe for a return home. This occasion

marked the beginning and most importantly the significance of Black Emancipation. Last year in 2019, the Ghanaian President, on a three-day working mission visit to Jamaica, invited Africans in Jamaica to return home, as Ghana is our home.

The years 2015-2025 mark the International Decade of African Descent. This was the event that unveiled the "Ark of Return" monument in a public forum entitled "Remember Slavery" hosted at United Nation Headquarters on the 19th October 2015 in partnership with the Permanent Mission of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago to the United Nations. The film featuring "Queen Nanny Legendary Maroon Chieftainess" was screened. I attended, as I represented Queen Nanny in the film. Four years later, I returned with our Indigenous Peoples Maroon contingent. And where do we go next? In 2021 the Maroon Women Chambers of Cooperation will host a Maroon Gathering in Dominica, to rally Maroons of the Diaspora to come together so that we can address issues such as sovereignty and self-determination, sustainable development and entrepreneurship.

This is the beginning of the way forward.

Let us command the reparation of the damage that was done.

Let us demand the restoration of our dignity and integrity as a sovereign noble people and by so doing we will bring beauty to the whole of the human race.



The Maroon Contingent to the U.N. from left to right: Her Excellency the Hon. Fidelia Graand-Galon of the Okanis/Ndjuka Tribe in Suriname; Lisa Atwater, Merkin Maroon, Trinidad and Tobago; Phil Phixico, Phil "Pompey" Fixico, Seminole Maroon Descendant, USA; Chief Akilah Jaramogi, Merikin Maroon; Gaamaa Gloria "MaMa G" Simms, Paramount Queen of Maroons in Jamaica.

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